
THE LIBRARY AS INSTALLATION

Raphael Rubinstein

As bookstores close in ever larger numbers all over the world and as libraries, great and small, cede more and more of their square footage to computer work stations and touch screens, the former inhabitants of such spaces, all those paper-and-cloth codices, all those yellowing periodicals, are on the move. Like the Germanic tribes displaced by the westward march of Central Asian nomads in the Middle Ages, these vulnerable books are compelled to push into new territories, driving out (at least temporarily) the previous inhabitants as they venture into lands where they are strangers, interlopers. Lately a number of art galleries and exhibition spaces have been the target of these biblio-migrations.

In the fall of 2013, Mexican-born, New York-based artist Pablo Helguera transformed Kent Fine Art into a Spanish-language bookstore called Librería Donceles. For two months the Chelsea gallery, which usually mounts shows of artists such as Llyn Foulkes, Antoni Muntadas and Heide Fasnacht, was filled with thousands of books in Spanish that Helguera had collected in Mexico City, either via outright donations or in exchange for his drawings. The show's title alluded to Calle Donceles, a street in the center of Mexico City famed for its second-hand bookstores that, like their brethren around the world, are steadily diminishing in numbers. Even more startling than the sudden appearance of a used bookstore in a Chelsea art gallery was the fact that Librería Donceles was the only such entity in New York City. One of the things that inspired Helguera to launch the project was the disappearance of all of New York City's Spanish bookstores, despite the fact that a quarter of the city's population (some 2 million people) is Spanish-speaking. (After its run at Kent, the itinerant Librería Donceles decamped to a storefront in a Mexican-American neighborhood in Tempe, Arizona, where it was sponsored by the Art Museum of Arizona State University; simultaneously a smaller version sprang up in San Francisco's Mission District; in the spring of 2015, the bookstore will return to New York for three months, this time in a warehouse in the Red Hook¹ section of Brooklyn and it will now offer some 20,000 volumes; subsequently it is scheduled to appear at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle.)

Furnished with armchairs, coffee tables, rugs, assorted lamps and even plaster busts of Cervantes and Shakespeare, and divided by the gallery walls and bookcases into small alcove-like spaces, Librería Donceles at Kent Fine Art was a very inviting environment. It felt more like a private library than a commercial establishment, and was a perfect place to disappear into a book (or several) for an hour or two. The selection was wildly disparate, but also carefully organized, sometimes arranged into small artful installations. Among the items I noticed were a copy of *Para Leer al Pato Donald*, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's influential 1971 analytical exposé of Donald Duck comics, a signed copy of the Spanish translation of Bill Clinton's autobiography (*Mi Vida*), lots of great-looking pulp fiction, some displayed on narrow shelves with covers facing out, a book on the murals of José Clemente Orozco propped on a portable turntable, and an open suitcase full of political tomes. Not everything took the form of a book: I spotted a framed menu from the historic Mexico City restaurant Prendes and a poster for the great Cuban film *Memorias de Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment) by Spanish painter Antonio Saura. One could see that Helguera was trying to wrest some order from this avalanche of printed matter and also sense that he was relishing its randomness and chaos—the result was a fascinating essay in cultural history, with an emphasis on Mexico.

Each visitor was allowed to take home a single volume after making a pay-what-you-wish donation, the proceeds from which were passed on to local Spanish reading programs designed to assist immigrants. (A smartly designed poster alerted the “estimados clientes/dear customers” that books bearing green stickers were “not for sale.”) Helguera or an associate of his offered visitors “brief consultations” in order to determine their “bibliological profile” and suggest where they might like to look for a book. Each volume contained a newly made ex libris label identifying its donor and provenance. The book I selected, after much browsing and long internal debate about my final choice (on the day I visited there was no one available to consult), was a 2007 anthology of articles about books and libraries from the Mexican literary supplement *Hoja por Hoja* titled *Libro Albedrío*. The ex libris tells me that it came from Rocío A. Sanchez Hernández at the Biblioteca Guillermo Bonfil Batalla in Mexico City (part of the National School of Anthropology and History). The title is a pun on the phrase “libre albedrío,” which means “free will.” It seemed appropriate to select a book about books.

One of the contributors to *Libro Albedrío* is Alberto Manguel, the Argentine-born writer and anthologist who has gained worldwide recognition for his investigation of books and reading, most notably in *A History of Reading* (2007). In his *Hoja por Hoja* essay, “La Biblioteca de Julien Sorel,” Manguel laments the massive diminution of the power of the book in Western culture over the (now) nearly two centuries since Stendhal published *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Manguel may be the best-known elegist of the book in our time, but he is hardly the only one. Countless writers have lamented the demise of the old-fashioned analogue book (and a few have welcomed the ebook); the recent popularity of “bibliomemoirs” like Rebecca Mead's *My Life in Middlemarch* may also speak to our

anxieties about the fate of books. We are certainly at a turning point in the history of publishing, but the paper-based codex of yore is still very much with us, especially in the zones of contemporary art. One only has to look at an event like the New York Art Book Fair, an annual event that has been growing larger every year. The 2014 edition attracted some 30,000 people, who wandered among the 350 exhibitors filling several floors of MOMA PS1. Although there are many dealers of rare books and ephemera at the Art Book Fair (sometimes asking hefty prices for things like old punk fliers and exhibition announcements—memo to self: never throw away any printed matter), the majority of exhibitors offered books and ‘zines at reasonable prices. I suspect many people are attracted to the New York Art Book Fair and other events of the kind because, in dramatic contrast to the realm of galleries and auction houses and, alas, all too often, museums, artists’ books, by and large, are not only affordable but also not viewed as speculative investments or means of enhancing your social status.

An exception to this low-key economy is Richard Prince’s library in the Upstate New York town of Rensselaerville where the artist has put on display selections from his dazzling collection of first editions and documents relating to postwar literature and culture, high and low. Spending some of the millions of dollars he has made from his art, Prince has amassed a collection so impressive that the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris recently invited him to curate a show of his holdings. Long a collector of images, Prince now incorporates his book collecting into his art, most notably when he commissioned a printer to produce faultless facsimiles of the first edition of *A Catcher in the Rye* with one significant difference: J.D. Salinger’s name is replaced throughout the volume with Prince’s own. As in Prince’s paintings and photographs, these faux readymades rely on appropriation, but they also stress the fetishizing and commodification of first editions. While this may reflect Prince’s experience as a maker of artworks that have themselves been fetishized and commodified, even when their artistic importance is debatable (I’m thinking of his Nurse Paintings, those darlings of auction houses), it also frames the book as a collectible, a luxury object, a target of speculative investment, in effect transposing the worst aspects of the contemporary art market into the realm of books.

This is clearly not what Helguera is doing with his Librería Donceles project, nor was it the case with two other book-based exhibitions: the art collective Antena’s project of turning part of the Blaffer Museum in Houston into an independent bookstore [see *Gulf Coast* Volume 27.1] and, more recently, “The Library Vaccine” at Artists Space in New York. This latter show, which took its title from a 1981 text by art critic Edit DeAk, assembled six separate collections of books, each of which roughly corresponded to a different decade from the 1960s on. The collections were chosen, in the words of the organizers, “in order to sample art’s distinctive relationship to the book form in its singularity, and in its states of reproduction, distribution and accumulation.”

The show was split between Artists Space's two locations. Occupying the smaller Walker Street space was "The Colin De Land Library," which consisted of several hundred books that belonged to Colin De Land, the legendary New York art dealer who died in 2003. Displayed on the same plain black metal bookcases as when they resided at American Fine Art, the books have remained together thanks to a German collector who purchased them after De Land's death. It's a wonderfully eclectic collection, made more so by being arranged in alphabetical order, no matter what the subject. Thus, a book on French abstract painter Bernard Frieze sits next to a volume on Fassbinder; one of Thomas Bernhard's caustic memoirs is sandwiched between a book on the films of Brigitte Bardot and Lucille O'Ball's autobiography (one can only imagine how Bernhard, who hated actors, would have felt about this). Another unlikely juxtaposition was a book of Ellsworth Kelley's drawings leaning against a copy of *Fetish Girls* by erotic photographer Eric Kroll, an accidental meeting that made me wonder if there isn't a certain affinity between Kelly's elegant, streamlined, refined contour drawings and the sleek profiles of Kroll's leather and vinyl-encased models. I was surprised and intrigued by some of the artists represented in De Land's library (which also incorporated books that had belonged to his wife, art dealer Pat Hearn, who pre-deceased him): Enrico Baj, Bas Jan Ader, Dennis Adams, artists I admire but never associated with De Land (nor with Hearn). One of the messages of the Colin De Land Library was how interesting art dealers can be, at least some of them. Another was that nothing is more revealing of a person than the books on their shelves. I can't help noting that De Land and Richard Prince collaborated in a short-lived hoax that involved making and exhibiting work that was credited to a fictional artist named John Dogg; it's kind of surprising that Prince didn't acquire De Land's library for himself.

In the main SoHo space a few blocks away were the other five "libraries": one devoted to the activities of German publisher and book designer Hansjörg Mayer who has been producing innovative artist books since the 1960s. Also on view, spread out on a sea of tables, was a selection of recent artists books chosen by Gregorio Magnani, a European-based curator and writer who specializes in artists' books. Nearby was "Vigilance: an Exhibition of Artists' Books Exploring Strategies for Social Concern," curated by veteran art critic Lucy Lippard and artist Mike Glier. While "Vigilance" and the Mayer and Magnani displays were all worthy curatorial projects, the other parts of "The Library Vaccine" were more compelling, perhaps because, like the Colin De Land Library, they were intensely personal. That was certainly the case with the part of the show devoted to novelist Helen DeWitt. An American writer who has lived for extended periods in London and Berlin, DeWitt agreed to have her entire library shipped from Berlin to New York and put on display. While clearly a writer's working library, it also contains volumes that she probably acquired in college. In contrast to the strictly alphabetized De Land collection, DeWitt's books were arranged by subject, allowing one to track her wide-ranging interests and areas of research, one of which is language acquisition. Certain volumes were displayed on tables, sometimes opened to specific pages. Attached to a facing wall were printouts of DeWitt's blogging on the project, screengrabs from her computer, and her commentaries about the connections among certain books; other texts pertained

to her private life, offering glimpses of her troubling encounters with a stalker. Viewers (or maybe that should be “readers”) were invited to find their own paths through DeWitt’s library. It was a bit like spending time in a stranger’s home. One felt part detective, part voyeur, part anthropologist and, maybe, even part researcher.

In a video interview conducted for “The Library Vaccine,” archivist Ann Butler asks the rhetorical question, “Are the libraries of cultural producers important?” Certainly, for anyone interested in writing about DeWitt or De Land, there was much to learn about them through their books, and since DeWitt was so actively involved in the show, there was a potential for dialogue with her. The most explicitly interactive part of De Witt’s library were several shelves stocked with copies of John Chris Jones’s *The Internet and Everyone* (2000), a book DeWitt is so passionate about that years ago she bought the last 100 remaindered copies and has been hauling them around with her ever since; they were for sale at Artist’s Space at \$15 each.

Somewhat paradoxically, the most powerful “library” at Artists Space didn’t include any of the actual books in question, only facsimiles and photographs. This was “The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton.” In 1959, Halliwell and Orton were two struggling young writers living together in a small apartment in North London, trying to keep the true nature of their relationship secret in a nation where homosexuality was still a crime. On a tight budget, they patronized the local public library but were irritated by how much shelf space was given to what Orton termed “rubbishy novels and rubbishy books” instead of to serious literature. In revenge, they began to steal books from the library, alter them with irreverent collages and fake blurbs, and surreptitiously return them to the shelves of the Islington Public Library. Starting slowly at first, this covert campaign grew in scope, involving dozens of books in all sorts of genres detective novels, romance novels, art books, poetry collections, studies of famous actors, reference books. In her recent book *Malicious Damage: the Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, British scholar Ilsa Colsell describes how the books “were quietly returned to the shelves with their protective plastic covers replaced: a restored uniformity obscuring the texture of revision beneath, their creators hovering nearby to watch the public as they might encounter them.” In a parallel project, the pair also systematically removed illustrations from art books and used them to cover every inch of wall space in their apartment, turning it into a walk-in collage. Eventually, Orton and Halliwell were caught and charged with larceny and malicious and willful damage. Convicted, each man served six months in prison and had to pay substantial fines. For Orton, the prison sentence turned out to be a blessing: it helped him sharpen his writing, developing a voice that would make him one of the most celebrated English playwrights of the 1960s. Halliwell had a much harder time. In 1967, frustrated by his failure as a writer and artist, and resentful at his partner’s great success, Halliwell brutally murdered Orton before taking his own life.

For more than half a century the defaced book covers have been preserved by the Islington authorities, first as evidence, now as valuable cultural artifacts. Since the Islington Local History Centre was unwilling to lend the fragile collaged book jackets for this show, Artists Space made accurate facsimiles, which were mounted on a freestanding wall covered with enormous, full-scale black-and-white photographs of Orton and Halliwell's flat. Originally taken by the police as evidence of Halliwell and Orton's crimes, these photographs now function as documentation of a vanished interior impossible to understand as anything but an art installation.

Until now, neither Orton nor Halliwell has figured in art history, in part, no doubt, because the actual collages have never been exhibited. As Colsell points out, their collages have clear affinities with what the English Pop artists were doing in the 1950s. Let's hope that her book, which includes large color illustrations of all the surviving book covers, will foster a greater appreciation of these collages as art and not merely as incidental items in the tragic biography of a renowned dramatist. Their presence (at a distance) in the Artists Space show may also bring more artworld attention, as well as spark new discussions about libraries as social institutions and as the loci of imaginative activity. Along with projects like Librería Donceles and Agnieszka Kurant's sculptural installation *Phantom Library* (a long shelf of empty, but strikingly designed books bearing the titles of fictional works mentioned by famous authors), it suggests that, more than six centuries after the birth of Johannes Guttenberg and 70-plus years since Jorge Luis Borges wrote "The Library of Babel," a story that famously begins "The universe (which others call the Library)," we have yet to finish with the imaginative and conceptual potential of in-gathered books.

Fig. 2. Installation view of Librería Donceles at Kent Fine Art, New York. 2014. Photography by Raphael Rubinstein.

¹ The move to Red Hook was supported, in part, by the New York-based organization A Blade of Grass, which in 2014 awarded Helguera one of its inaugural Fellowships for Socially Engaged Art.

Fig. 3. (opposite) Installation view of Librería Donceles at Kent Fine Art, New York. 2014. Photography by Raphael Rubinstein.

Fig. 4. (opposite) Installation view of Librería Donceles at Kent Fine Art, New York. 2014. Photography by Raphael Rubinstein.

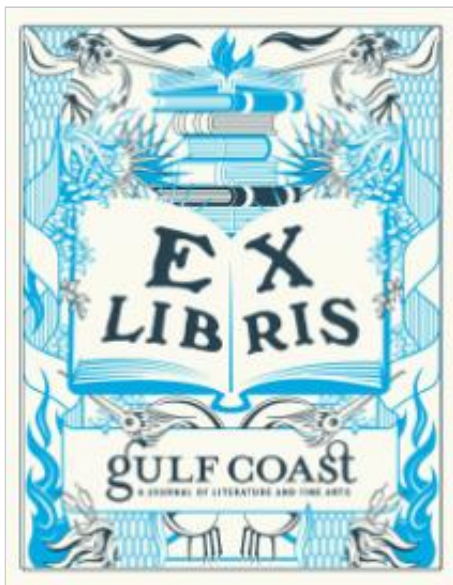
Fig. 5. The Colin de Land Library, from "The Library Vaccine." Artists Space, New York. 2014. Photography by Daniel Pérez.

Fig. 6. Display of books selected by Helen DeWitt. The Library of Helen DeWitt, from "The Library Vaccine." Artists Space, New York. 2014. Photography by Daniel Pérez.

Fig. 7. Copies of John Chris Jones's *The Internet and Everyone* displayed for sale. The Library of Helen DeWitt, from "The Library Vaccine." Artists Space, New York. 2014. Photography by Raphael Rubinstein.

Fig. 7. The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton, from "The Library Vaccine." Artists Space, New York. 2014. Photography by Raphael Rubinstein.

SHARE



[PURCHASE CURRENT ISSUE \(PURCHASE/\)](#)

Keep in touch with Gulf Coast. Sign up for all of our latest news.

Email Address

© 2015 Gulf Coast Literary Journal

Gulf Coast Literary Journal
4800 Calhoun Road
Houston, TX 77204-3013

design: sp/office (<http://smallprojectoffice.com/>) · development: method 21 (<http://www.method21.com>)