ARLIS/ANZ 2016 Conference: The Persistence of the Real

Is it a library or is it art?

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Abstract

The Future Library. The Library of Unborrowed Books. The Reanimation Library. A Library of Approximate Location. These are not typical names for libraries but they are tantalising and they are real. Each of these libraries has been created by an artist and they are not the only ones. These libraries function both as libraries and as art installations and can be temporary exhibitions or permanent installations. Some are recognisably libraries and others are not. Some are tied to a specific place and others are peripatetic. They are scattered around the globe and, as well as investigating artistic themes of time, loss, place and memory, consider the library as subject as well as object. As such, they raise interesting questions for librarians. What does the library symbolise for the artist and the audience? What are the motivations of the artists involved? What purposes do these libraries aim to achieve? What does it mean for the artist to become the librarian? What are the implications for us as
librarians? What can we learn from these artist libraries? This paper will explore these questions and attempt some preliminary answers.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, a number of libraries have emerged that do not fit into the traditional library types of public, academic, school or national/state libraries. They could be described as special libraries but even within that type, they would be considered esoteric. Their names indicate this: the Future Library, the Library of Unborrowed Books, the Reanimation Library and A Library of Approximate Location are just of four of these highly unusual libraries.

These libraries share some common characteristics: they have been created by artists; they function as both library and art installation; and they share a common concern with the library as performative space. Beyond those characteristics, they are highly varied: some are temporary exhibitions and others are permanent. Some are tied to a specific place and others are peripatetic. Some are physical, others are virtual and a sometimes both. There are approximately 40 of these artist libraries around the world (see Appendix A for a list and Appendix B for a map) and, as well as considering artistic themes such as time, place, loss and memory, explore the library as subject and object. For librarians, they raise interesting questions. What motivates these artists to create these libraries? What do these libraries aim to achieve? What
are the implications for library practice? What can we, as librarians, learn from these artist libraries?

**Artist libraries**

Little research has been undertaken into artist libraries to date. Consequently only a handful of scholarly papers have been published on the topic. Radford, Radford and Lingel (2012) examine the artist library through the Foucaultian lens of discourse formation with particular regard to deaccessioning by mainstream public and academic libraries. Two libraries stand out accordingly: the Reanimation Library and the Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession. These libraries seek out the books discarded by other libraries and create new libraries out of them, thereby giving value to books that were deemed to no longer have any value. However the value lies not in the discarded book’s content but in its potential for artistic inspiration or its challenge to conventional notions of value (Radford, Radford & Lingel 2012, p. 258). Furthermore, these libraries in setting themselves up as libraries utilise the library’s potential for rebellion, resistance and play and challenge the library notion of itself as ‘an institutional authority of knowledge, (Radford, Radford & Lingel 2012, p. 255).

Cheinman (2014) on the other hand considers these libraries to be part of a trend to create alternative art library spaces in which museum and gallery visitors can enhance their understanding of art through improved access to art books and
journals. She provides three case studies (dubbed portraits) which illustrate different spaces for art libraries. These spaces achieve openness by distributing books and journals or situating reading spaces within exhibition spaces; by encouraging visitors to edit works through play, interaction and study; and through the development of performative readings to allow greater engagement with the text (Cheinman 2014, pp. 44-56).

The notion of performance is picked up by Springer who describes the library as ‘a hybrid site for performing the book’ (Springer’s emphasis) (2015, p. 7). Furthermore, the library is both ‘political economy and intellectual space’ (Springer 2015, p. 21). It is also a space that ‘privileges use over display and presentation’ (Springer 2015, p. 9). Indeed, it is this aspect of libraries that ensures that artist libraries are not just books arranged as art: viewers are encouraged to browse and read – to use the books (Epicenter 2015, Sydney Mechanics School of Arts 2014).

The library as intellectual space was a motivating factor for the art historian Aby Warburg to turn his personal library into a library for other scholars. His ‘law of the good neighbour’ has been a strong influence on many artist-librarians who have used it as inspiration for developing their own cataloguing and classification systems. Steinberg has summarised Warburg’s law of the good neighbour as the principle that each book should ‘stage a conversation with its neighbour: ask a question, provide an answer’ (2012, p. 128). Historian Carlo Ginzburg has described Warburg’s library as ‘une machine à penser’ – ‘an engine to think with’ and argues that
readers’ interaction with the arrangement of the Warburg library is fundamental to their experience of it (2012, p. 85). Unsurprisingly then, artist Eliza Newman-Saul says of her artist library (The Library of Impending Decline), ‘The library offers real books to be examined. It offers conversation’ (2006, p. 30).

Another strong influence comes from the art historian Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Unpacking my library’, his rumination on book collecting (1931). Writer-in-residence at the Reanimation Library Will Saunders contrasts the artist-librarian Andrew Beccone to Benjamin’s collector: the Benjaminian collector is a completist whereas Beccone’s collecting is motivated by the possibility of use (2013). Yet, simultaneously, there is an aspect of personal ownership in the Reanimation Library’s collection that recalls the Benjaminian collection which loses its meaning when it loses its owner (Saunders 2013). Whilst the Reanimation Library might not be an accurate reflection of Benjamin’s notions of a book collection, Bakker asserts that Benjamin would have felt very much at home in the Prelinger Library, which he describes as ‘a disorder that is not arbitrary, but unfinished’ (2015). Another library that might well suit Benjamin is the Serving Library which follows Benjamin’s suggestion that, if available books are unsatisfactory, then the collector must undertake to write the books (Hutton 2011, p. 33).
Methodology

The current research into artist libraries is part of a larger research project into independent libraries. Through web searches and analysis of publicly available documentation (websites, reviews, newspaper and magazine articles), a subset of independent libraries have been identified as artist libraries and their characteristics examined and analysed.

The characteristics of the artist library

As noted in the introduction above, artist libraries share common characteristics which help to define what an artist library is. Firstly, they are created by artists. These artists may occasionally be librarians by training and profession (c.f. Charlie Macquarie of A Library of Approximate Location, Andrew Beccone of the Reanimation Library, and Julia Weist of the Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession) but usually are not.

Secondly the artist library functions as both library and as art installation. Even the temporary artist libraries which begin life as art installations function as libraries because they invite audiences to browse and read the books on display. These art installations usually provide a reading space which facilitates their functioning as a library – it may even be as simple as a stool located near the books which was my personal experience with a work by Hu Xiangcheng (Doors Away From Home – Doors At Home) at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (Miner and Weinstein 2016, p. 96). The
permanent libraries which at first glance appear to be normal libraries nonetheless have artistic characteristics through the arrangement of the books or the paraphernalia of the artist’s studio.

Thirdly there is a concern with performance. Artists recognise the library as a public space for the performance of a private act – reading (Hastings 2008, p. 7). They are fascinated by the performative aspect of the library. Indeed it could be argued that an artist’s library has three dimensions:

![Diagram showing a triangle with Library, Art, and Performance at the vertices.]

Australian artist Monica Oppen describes this best:

… every book in the process of being read, the slow, rhythmic motion of the pages being turned, could be considered to be a performance, not an extroverted show à la Gilbert and George but a private performance that requires no audience. (Oppen 2015, p. 20)
Oppen has also noted in relation to artist’s books, ‘books are not meant to be exhibited, they are meant to be read’ (2015, p. 5). By extension, the same can be said of the books in artist libraries – they are meant to be read, not just exhibited. Artist libraries draw attention to the performance of reading through the desire to connect books to readers (c.f. the Library of Unborrowed Books) and readers to books through their situation in the gallery/library space where the private performance that requires no audience gains an audience.

These dimensions of the artist library can be illustrated through a consideration of some of these libraries.

**Future Library**

Scottish artist Katie Paterson has created the Future Library (Framtidsbiblioteket) in Norway as one of four public artworks commissioned by Bjørvika Utvikling, a new urban development in Oslo. The library consists of two parts: a forest and a dark archive. In the Nordmarka forest outside Oslo, Paterson planted 1000 trees in 2014 with the intent that, in 2114, they will be harvested to make paper to print 1000 copies of 100 books. The trees that were cut down to make way for these saplings are being used to build a new library (scheduled to open in 2019). This library will contain the dark archive which will hold the manuscripts for the 100 books plus a small room that will display the title pages of the manuscripts. Between 2014 and 2114, 100 authors will be invited to submit a manuscript for inclusion in the Future Library. The first three authors to do so are Margaret Atwood (Canada), David
Mitchell (UK) and Sjón (Iceland). The Future Library is supported by the City of Oslo which has guaranteed that it will see it through to its conclusion in 2014 (Future Library 2016).

**Reanimation Library**

The Reanimation Library was founded by artist-librarian Andrew Beccone who began collecting discarded books for use in his art-practice in 2001 (Beccone 2012). A year later, he decided to turn it into a publicly accessible collection – the Reanimation Library – and in 2006 found a permanent home at Proteus Gowanus (Beccone 2012). It is now located at the Queen’s Museum in Flushing Meadows, New York (Reanimation Library 2016c). Beccone calls it a presence library – a mistranslation of the German for reference library: *Präsenzbibliothek* (Beccone 2012). Books for the library are chosen according to two criteria: that they have been discarded by a library or other owner, and that they contain large amounts of visual content (Beccone 2012). The Reanimation Library describes itself as ‘pan(ning) for gold amidst the sediment of print culture’, particularly in relation to visual content (Reanimation Library 2016d). It then makes that content available to artists for use or inspiration for other works. This is done via residencies and what Beccone calls branch and spore libraries. Branch libraries are temporary installations that aims to replicate the Reanimation Library in other locations using books from local sources (Reanimation Library 2016d). Spore libraries are temporary exhibitions of parts of the main collection in other locations (Reanimation Library 2016f).
Prelinger Library

In 2004, the Prelinger Library was opened in San Francisco by husband-and-wife team, Rick Prelinger and Megan Shaw Prelinger (Prelinger Library 2016b). It is noted for its geo-spatial classification system which has been described as the ‘library as map, (Prelinger, Prelinger, & Kissane 2015, p. 2). The shelves of the library become a ‘finding-aid, for the corresponding digital collection (Prelinger, Prelinger, & Kissane 2015, p. 8). The Prelingers aim to collect material that is not normally collected by libraries including historical ephemera, maps, periodicals and guidebooks (Prelinger Library 2016a). Having both physical and digital versions of material facilitates (in their words) ‘a creative tension between analog and digital modes of discovery’ (Prelinger, Prelinger, & Kissane 2015, p. 8).

Library of Unborrowed Books

Turkish artist Meriç Algün Ringborg is the creator of the Library of Unborrowed Books. Algün Ringborg approaches a library to provide her with a list of books in their collection which have never been borrowed and Algün Ringborg then displays these books in an exhibition space where she invites viewers to browse and read these books. The Library of Unborrowed Books has now had six iterations: Stockholm Public Library at Konstakademien, Center for Fiction at Art in General in New York, the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the 19th Biennale of Sydney, Centro de Documentación Regional “Juan Bautista Vázquez”, in Cuenca, Ecuador for the 12th Cuenca Biennial, the Gennadius
Library at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, and the Sabancı University Information Center at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Istanbul (Algün Ringborg 2016). Whether Algün Ringborg is aware of Ranganathan’s Third Law of library science (‘every book its reader’) is unclear, yet it is this law that springs to mind when considering the Library of Unborrowed Books.

Library of Approximate Location

The full name of this library is A Library of Approximate Locations and Location Approximations through the Arid States (Macquarie 2016a). Devised by artist-librarian, Charlie Macquarie, the library is installed in various remote locations throughout the United States for one day in each location and during that day, the Librarian (Macquarie) documents the site through photography and description and assists visitors with reference and research (Macquarie 2016b). Each site’s documentation is added to the library’s collection (Macquarie 2016b).

Symbolism of the library

In an artist library, there are two types of symbolism at play: their symbolism as art and their symbolism as library.

As libraries

Curiously, artist libraries appear to symbolise Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science (1931). The Reanimation Library explicitly acknowledges Ranganathan’s
First Law: books are for use (Reanimation Library 2016e). It saves books discarded by other libraries because of its belief that a book’s intended use is not its only possible use (Reanimation Library 2016e). The LFTT Library, which saved an old monastery library collection likewise uses the books as inspiration for other works via workshops and installations (LFTT Library 2016).

Cristina Garriga’s My Bookcase platform aims to connect readers to books via the sharing of personal libraries, thereby following Ranganathan’s Second Law: every reader his/her book (My Bookcase n.d.).

As noted previously, the Library of Unborrowed Books speaks directly to Ranganathan’s Third Law: every book its reader. The Future Library’s dark archive of manuscripts raises the question: will these books find their readers in 2114?

Ranganathan’s Fourth Law (‘save the time of the reader’) is embodied by the Floating Library which brings the library to the user, as does the Librarium’s Bike-Book-Machine (Conroy 2016, Peters 2016).

Katie Paterson, creator of the Future Library, takes Ranganathan’s Fifth Law literally: the library as a growing organism. Here the library is a forest that in 100 years will become a library. Another artist to conceptualise the library as forest (or rather the forest as library) is Spanish artist Miguel Ángel Blanco whose Biblioteca Del Bosque is ‘a constantly growing compilation of discoveries, of revelations, of invocations, of spells, of ritual ceremonies, kept ALIVE in the box-books that make
up my Forest’s Library’ (Ángel Blanco n.d.). In contrast, Roni Horn has not been quite so literal with her Library of Water but she conceives of it as an organism and a place that is meant to be used (Herbert 2007, p. 82).

As art

Artist libraries do not deal with a single theme only, though there are common themes they deal with. Pisciotta has recently examined the meaning of the library in contemporary art and identified four ideas emerging in artworks based on the library which are the relationship of the library to its community, ownership (of the library) and authorship (of the books therein), a questioning of the library’s views of order as expressed through classification, and the tension between chaos and order (2016, p.2). Whilst there is some overlap between these themes and those dealt with by artist libraries, there are other themes to be considered.

Time

The artist library that most obviously deals with time is the Future Library. Its plan of collecting manuscripts for future publication is part time capsule and part message-in-a-bottle. In contrast to the Future Library which looks forward, A People’s Archive of Sinking and Melting considers both past and present through its collection of natural and found objects from coastal areas: objects uncovered by coastal erosion causing us to consider the impacts of climate and environmental change (Balkin, Roloff, and Thornton 2016).
**Place**

Several artist libraries focus strongly on place: A Library of Approximate Location is all about place. Vatnasafn/the Library of Water has an intense connection to place through the location of its building (a former library in Iceland), the collection of glacial waters from around Iceland and its collection of weather reports (as reported by the residents of Stykkishólmur, where the library is located). Each Northern hemisphere summer, the Floating Library celebrates the 10,000 lakes of Minnesota by bringing artist books to lake users in a purpose-built raft (Peters 2016). Ángel Blanco’s Biblioteca del Bosque is likewise a celebration of the mystery of the forest of Fuenfría Valley (Ángel Blanco n.d.). The Walking Library celebrates place by bringing together the traditions of the walking holiday with reading and book collecting (Walking Library n.d.). A People’s Archive of Sinking and Melting seeks to record disappearing places through a collection of items left behind by environmental changes (Balkin, Roloff, and Thornton 2016).

**Memory and Loss**

Several artist libraries closely examine the linked themes of memory and loss. This is perhaps to be expected as the library is a memory institution so any artist wishing to explore memory may well gravitate to the library as a form that lends itself readily to this theme. The associated theme of loss is perhaps not so obvious for the library, yet forgetting is the flipside of memory so, to the artist, loss is a natural thematic associate of memory. Memory and loss lies at the heart of the Wildgoose Memorial
Library, which, in its own words, is dedicated to ‘the mysteries of the living in relation to the dead, and on memory and immortality’ (Wildgoose n.d.). It is part library and part wunderkammer with a highly gothic collection. As noted previously, the Reanimation Library aims to save books that might otherwise be lost and the Public Library of American Public Deaccession has catalogued books that have been deaccessioned. The objects collected by A People’s Archive of Sinking and Melting may in themselves be quite mundane but ‘stand as proxies for present and anticipated loss’ (Balkin, Roloff and Thornton 2016). The Foundling Archive saves personal items that have been discarded because their value has been forgotten. They see themselves as ‘guardians of the lost and found’ and hope that their example will inspire people to revisit their family archives and keep them, rather than throwing them out (The Foundling Archive n.d.).

**Artist motivation**

The act of building a library is viewed by these artist librarians as a creative act: for Katie Paterson, the book is a design that cannot be bettered and the Future Library can be summed up as the basic act of growing trees to make books (Unger 2016, p. 104). Beccone established the Reanimation Library when he realised that his art practice had become the making of a library (Beccone 2012). How we select books to preserve for the future motivates Algün Ringborg’s Library of Unborrowed Books by examining the books that have not been borrowed (Algün Ringborg 2016).
Another common motivation is the desire to share large collections with other artists and the public either as inspiration or source material. This is certainly the case with the Reanimation Library, the Bibliotheca Librorum Apud Artificem and the occasional appearances of the Martha Rosler Library (Filipovic 2007, Oppen 2015, Reanimation Library 2016d). Common also is the desire to put artist books in the hands of readers: the Brooklyn Art Library, the Floating Library and Tiny Library all aim to do this (Art House Projects LLC 2016b, Marcroy 2016, The Floating Library 2017). Related to this is the desire to connect readers to carefully curated collections on particular themes: disaster and catastrophe in the Library of Impending Decline, economics and radicalism in the Librarium, and affect and economic exchange in the Surplus Library (Conroy 2016, Hirsch 2011, Newman-Saul 2006).

**What librarians can learn from artist libraries**

In many ways, artist libraries invert traditional library practices such as acquisition, discovery, and weeding. They also challenge traditional cataloguing and classification practices. Consideration of these inversions and challenges could help librarians to refresh and innovate our practices.

**Acquisition**

Generally speaking, when libraries acquire material, it is material that has already been published. If libraries acquire unpublished material, it is usually archival in nature and as part of bequests or estate disposals. The Future Library and the
Brooklyn Art Library invert this process by going out and commissioning new work. As noted above, the Future Library is inviting selected authors to contribute new work for publication in 2114. The Brooklyn Art Library (the storefront and repository for the Sketchbook Project) does something similar (Art House Projects LLC 2016c). Artists are invited to purchase a sketchbook, fill it up with their work and return it to the Brooklyn Art Library which catalogues, tags and stores the sketchbook. The sketchbook may also be digitised and placed online. Members of the library can then browse and borrow these sketchbooks. To date, over 35,000 sketchbooks have been received by the Brooklyn Art Library (Art House Projects LLC 2016a).

Although increasing numbers of academic libraries are providing support for scholarly publishing (in particular, university presses) and many research libraries provide fellowships for researchers, the commissioning of new work specifically for acquisition is not a feature of mainstream libraries. Yet this commissioning lies at the heart of both the Future Library and the Brooklyn Art Library.

**Discovery**

Artist libraries encourage discovery through the browsing of the physical collection, but the Prelinger Library takes this one step further. Its collection does not circulate – instead users browse the physical collection and, once they have found a work they are interested in (which has been digitised), they can download a digital copy
(Prelinger, Prelinger, & Kissane 2015, p. 8). This inverts the more usual approach of a
user browsing an online catalogue, then borrowing the physical copy.

Artists are also using the library format as – to use a marketing term – a channel to
market. The collections of the Floating Library and Tiny Library consist of artists
books – the libraries are a way to get artist books to potential readers, particularly
readers who might not ordinarily come into contact with artist books (The Floating
Library 2016, Tiny Library 2016). This is not so much an inversion of practice as it is
a sharpening of focus – public libraries are already aware of their potential as tools
to create a market for authors through the distribution of their works but artist
libraries take this a step further by going out to the public (Newman 2011).

**Cataloguing**

Librarians have developed and refined their cataloguing practices over a very long
period. However those practices focus primarily on the text. In contrast, the
Reanimation Library is interested in the visual content of the discards it claims for its
library (Reanimation Library 2016f). It aims to preserve the design and visual
thinking contained in the illustrations found in these books. The Reanimation
Library is therefore highlighting a gap in our cataloguing practices. When we
catalogue, we will note that a book is illustrated. We might note that the illustrations
are black and white or coloured, that there is a portrait or a map included. That,
however, is it. We do not include a table of illustrations or figures or a list of plates
even though these days we include a table of contents.
The Brooklyn Art Library eschews traditional subject headings for themes and tags of its own devising to catalogue the sketchbooks in its collection: these themes are drawn from the challenges and events as it runs and one can search via keyword or browse a list of themes to find relevant works (Art House Projects LLC 2016c). This is neither inverting library practice nor highlighting a gap in our practices. Nor is it anything new: the use of folksonomies has been around for some time but Brooklyn Art Library’s use of it in preference to formalised subject headings suggests that it is more useful for discovery.

Classification

As noted above, the Prelinger Library uses its own geospatial classification system. The way the library is arranged is intended to reflect the thought processes of its founders (Feinberg 2008, p. 25). Their inspiration for this arrangement comes from Aby Warburg whose own library’s arrangement constantly changed to reflect not only his own thinking at the time but also his ‘law of the good neighbour’ (Prelinger, Prelinger & Kissane 2015, p. 2; Saxl 1986, p. 327). Developing their own cataloguing and classification systems is a common feature of artist libraries. Indeed, those that use Library of Congress Classification (such as the Reanimation Library) and Dewey Decimal Classification (such as the Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession) tend to stand out. Even the Library of Unborrowed Books eschews Dewey for an alphabetised arrangement of the books (Filgate 2013).
Weeding

The Reanimation Library, the Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession and even the Library of Unborrowed Books provide the most obvious examples of the inversion of traditional library practice. Here, artists are actively saving the books that libraries discard or, in the case of the Library of Unborrowed Books, preventing discards through encouraging visitors to read these books. After all, a list of books that have never been borrowed would normally be a starting place for weeding a collection as non-circulation is a key criterion for disposal, even if it is not the only criterion.

Conclusion

Artists make libraries as artworks which are also highly functional. In so doing, they recognise and draw attention to the performative nature of libraries, as well as using the form of the library to explore artistic themes of time, place, memory and loss. In drawing upon Warburg’s notion of library arrangement as conversation and Benjamin’s collector creating new works, artist libraries aim to provide source material and inspiration to other artists. Through their inversion of traditional library practice and highlighting of gaps and issues with the same, they can provide inspiration to librarians as well. It raises the question: what sort of libraries could librarians create if they treated them as works of art?
Bibliography


Oppen, M 2015, *This is not a cathedral*, Berkeley, California Codex Foundation.


Appendix A: An incomplete guide to artist libraries

Permanent libraries

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<tr>
<th>Library</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<td>Biblioteca Del Bosque/Library of the Forest</td>
<td>Miguel Ángel Blanco</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bibliotecadelbosque.net/la-biblioteca-del-bosque/">http://www.bibliotecadelbosque.net/la-biblioteca-del-bosque/</a></td>
<td>Fuenfría Valley, Guadarrama Mountains, Spain</td>
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<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Marshall Weber, Christopher Wilde, Shon Schooer, Stacey Wakefield, Kurt Allerslev and nine other artists</td>
<td><a href="http://booklyn.org/">http://booklyn.org/</a></td>
<td>Brooklyn, New York, USA</td>
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<td>Brooklyn Art Library</td>
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<td>Cabinet National Library</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/landUpdate.php">http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/landUpdate.php</a></td>
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### Wandering libraries

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<td>The Librarium</td>
<td>A mixed bunch of artists with library tendencies</td>
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<td>A People’s Archive of Sinking and Melting</td>
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## Temporary libraries

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<td>The Reading Project</td>
<td>Shaheryar Malik</td>
<td><a href="http://www.madebysherry.com/readingproject">http://www.madebysherry.com/readingproject</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Virtual libraries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix B: A map of artist libraries