

The Art School Notebook: observations and insights from a Graduate Library Trainee

As I have only been at the GSA for 9 weeks, I felt it dishonest to talk about the future of libraries, considering my relatively small amount of experience working in them. This presentation will therefore be a more personal insight into the everyday work of a Graduate Library Trainee, a role which has changed in many ways since Jennifer first started 3 years ago. I will begin by speaking about the School and my relation to it as an outsider in connection with the fire of May 23rd – I will also talk about how the fire has directly affected my work as a Graduate Library Trainee. I will then go on to speak about the building of a new collection for the Mackintosh Library, my projects for the year (including the creation of a fanzine section for the main Library), as well the variety of other work I am involved in. I will end with a brief observation about cataloguing and the nature of browsing, following on from Jennifer's reflections on serendipity.

Though before the post, I had volunteered for some time at the North of England Mining Institute library, as well as Tyne and Wear Archives, I didn't really have any preconceived notions of what it would be like to work in the Art School's library. The GSA feels very different from most other academic institutions – it is a very small campus where everybody seems to be close, to know one another – something that might not exist in a larger institution. The fire of May 23rd seems to have bound the students and staff even closer together than I assume they were before. It is a shared reference point of trauma, of pain – something which I have no part in as an outsider. Coming into the School this way, I could not completely understand how attached people were to the Mackintosh building – I had no personal connection to it, which made it quite difficult to fully empathise with people's grief. I saw it from the outside, disinterested, detached. However, one task changed my perception of the event. My predecessor had collected all known media coverage of the fire – every newspaper, website or journal article about the catastrophe - it was my job to catalogue all of this material into a folder by chronological order. Looking through the pictures and reading various articles made the event less abstract in my mind; they were the documents of a real event, they were photographs of a real fire that ravaged the building I can see from our office window. I was previously unaware of the extent to which the building and library had been devastated; the reported violence of the fire, the intensity of the ruin, the sound of smashing glass – it all came as a surprise – I hadn't thought of any of this. Even being told that it will be at least 5 years before students are allowed back into the Mackintosh Library brought home the reality of what had happened.

There is a plan later in the year for certain library staff, including myself, to enter the building with hard hats in order to dig through the ash of the library, with the hope of salvaging material from the collection. Whilst this will be an emotional and potentially traumatic experience for most, my objectivity, in this instance, serves as an advantage – I can approach the building relatively composed – I am excited, not saddened, by the prospect of recovering material in this way.

Though everything, I am told, goes on as normal, the effects of the fire in reference to the Library can be seen in the displacement of the Archives department, who are now right next door to the librarians. Before, the academic librarians might not see the archivists for weeks on end. Now, they are able to

immediately talk to us, and the two departments can communicate more effectively. This is interesting for me, as I am attracted to both library and archive work - I hope to be able to shadow the team soon to get an idea of what they do, which would inform the professional path I want to go down.

The fire has also affected the work I do as a Graduate Trainee – we now get a lot of book donations from people around the world, so it is my job to keep a note of the donations, update the wants list, and send out thank you letters. This gives me an opportunity to actually handle and look through what will eventually make up the new Mackintosh Library collection – this is fascinating. Indeed, a big task for the library in the coming years is the building of this new collection.

Though the fire was an unexpected tragedy, it has provided an opportunity to think again about the Mackintosh collection – there is a chance to be more radical, the possibility of creating, alongside the jewels of the old collection, specialist sections, niche sections. We have the opportunity of exerting more control, to rebuild in a different, more customised and directed way.

To this end, there is a ‘wants list’ of rare books which were destroyed in the fire that people can refer to when making donations – the creation of the collection will be more strategic, whilst the original was unplanned and slightly haphazard. Ultimately, it will end up being a better collection because of this. Early in the job, I also had the opportunity of accompanying the School’s two academic liaison librarians to the National Library of Scotland, as they had a number of books they were withdrawing. We spent the afternoon looking through a relatively small section of their books, taking out anything we thought might be appropriate for the new Mackintosh collection. This was very satisfying – using my patchy knowledge of 19th and 20th century art, as well as my eye for pretty book spines, I was able to actually contribute to the creation of the new Mackintosh Library collection – I felt directly involved in the School’s history – this was a wonderful, unimaginable experience. We plan to go back soon.

Because of the small size of the Library – and the school as a whole – I have been able to do a lot of different things which the academic liaison librarians don’t necessarily have time to do – things like arranging a display of artists’ books, setting up a competition for National Poetry day, organising a film-showing for Tove Jansson’s centenary that coincides with Scottish Book Week...

The position gives me the opportunity to take initiative in my own projects and ideas – one in particular being the creation of a new fanzine section for the library.

A fanzine, or zine for short, is essentially a self-publication, usually produced by one or two persons. The format is governed not by editorial board adjudication or peer reviews, but by heart-on-your-sleeve enthusiasm for the subject matter, lovingly assembled, reproduced and stapled or sewn together. The word ‘zine’ is derived from 1930s science fiction ‘fanzines’... circulation is typically limited to a few dozen, a few hundred, or a couple of thousand copies, but the content is always irrepressible.

Of 1980s and 1990s zine culture, Steven Duncombe writes, ‘In an era marked by the rapid centralisation of corporate media, zines are independent and localised, coming out of cities, suburbs and small towns across the USA, assembled on kitchen tables. They celebrate the everyperson in a world of celebrity, losers in a society that rewards the best and the brightest... Zinesters privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you.’

The idea to start a fanzine collection for the library came from my own experience of making zines, with a knowledge that fanzine collections are important not only as part of an Art School's library collection, but more generally speaking as objects of cultural history - it is essential they are preserved in order for people to have access to them in the future.

We have already received architecture fanzines from Spain, the USA and Switzerland, and we hope to reach out to the students of The School for their own contributions as well. We also plan to attend zine fairs and make trips to local, independent bookshops, in order to find more material for the collection.

Though there is a pleasing amount of variety to the work I do as a Graduate Trainee, what I enjoy the most is being involved with the actual material – the books themselves – rather than the metadata behind them. As such, I enjoy acquiring new Artists' Books for the library, as well as dealing with the requests as they come in, because it requires me to be familiar with the book and to take an interest in it outside of cataloguing – the zine collection also links into this – there is a connection with the people making them, the receipt of a physical object in the post, which gives one a grounding in the material reality of the library that computers, and the internet especially, tends to obscure.

Early in the traineeship, I also had to sit in and, eventually, lead library inductions for new students. Essentially improvising from a cue sheet and what I could remember from previous inductions; it was the first time I had been tasked with speaking to a group of people in this way. I wasn't particularly nervous, but I was aware of a crushing sense of dread – one could be particularly discouraged by students yawning, or even closing their eyes entirely. This experience taught me that librarians are expected to do a lot more than cataloguing books.

I am also in charge of writing blog posts about things that might interest Fine Art, Design and Architecture students. With all the tasks that make up a day's work, it can be hard to find the time to write new material every day – but it is something I enjoy doing and plan to do more of in the future. As the students of The School are very visual, it is important to create content for them which is attractive, but at the same time promotes use of the library. The blog entries do this by including a lot of photographs and illustrations, but also information about where to find books and DVDs related to the post in the library. It can be a useful promotional tool for new material, as well as a platform for news related to the library and its events. However it is important to note that blogs and social media are not the be all and end all of library promotion and use – they can be useful go-betweens for those involved. For those who aren't, they can miss out on valuable information – there should be a choice as to how we access this information, rather than an all or nothing approach that social media-exclusivity can create.

An important part of working in the library is issuing books and dealing with enquiries from students. It is pleasant to feel part of the life of the library, engaging with the students and the material they look at. At times, one can feel a little cut off from the rest of the library, being in an office. However, once at the front desk, one can see the students coming in and using the library, asking questions, taking books

out – in short, one can immediately see the result of one’s work, as there is an engagement with the individual, rather than a computer (for the most part).

Speaking of computers, during my time cataloguing, I began to think about the metadata I was creating, and its relevance to students. Whilst I understand that catalogue information is important for creating an archive of data, as well as being useful for librarians when stock-taking and identifying books, I wondered if it was necessary for users to see subject headings, pagination, ISBN numbers and book size, when they searched the online catalogue.

For me, browsing via a computer is not the same as browsing the aisles. For one, the exploration of physical space, of feeling situated in that space, cannot be recreated via a computer – nor should it be. If physical browsing is about slowness and chance, browsing via computers is about speed and accuracy. I use online catalogues to quickly check availability, make broad searches, and to look up class marks – if there is any other information, I don’t notice it. It might be useful for the GSA and other libraries to study how their online catalogue is used by asking questions of their students; the answers could be used to tailor catalogue information to students’ needs. It also might be useful for publishers to provide photographs of the book spine, as well as the cover, to make it ever-so-slightly easier to find the book you’re looking for – this would be especially helpful for the visually-minded students of the Art School.

And so, here ends our presentations – I hope that our observations and insights as new entrants into the field have provided much material for debate, and we look forward to discussing with you further during the break if you have any questions. Thank you.