White Paper Report

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Project Director: Johanna Drucker (drucker@gseis.ucla.edu)

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Name of Project: Artists' Books Online: From Prototype to Distributed Community
Institution: University of Virginia
Project Director: Johanna Drucker
Award Amount: $30,000
To support: To expand our working prototype of an online collection of artists' books through development of a distributed community of contributors.
Project Website: www.artistsbooksonline.org
Keywords: artists' books, metadata, criticism, online collections

White Paper:

Our project was to take a working prototype of artistsbooksonline.org collection and test the development of a distributed community of contributors.

Artists' books are original works of art in the codex format. Scholarly and critical interest in these works has increased considerably in recent years (if sessions at the Modern Language Association and College Art Association are any indication), and programs and classes in art schools and book arts centers are proliferating. Nonetheless, scholarship and criticism remain hampered in part by limited access to individual works (usually housed in special collections libraries or museums) and by little overall knowledge of the field as a whole (its history, scope, scale, major practitioners, and exemplary works). ABsOnline was created to address some of these difficulties by providing a facsimile-based repository that supports access to these rare, hard-to-find, and difficult to use books. The mission is create a resource for scholarship, teaching, and critical work in the field through a collaboratively produced collection made at a high level of technical and professional standards while helping shape the critical discussion through the specifics of our metadata scheme.

At the time that we applied for NEH funding, we were interested in taking the working prototype we had populated with about 80 books and seeing if we could engage various partners in a distributed model of content development. In other words, we wanted to encourage the participation of artists, institutional collectors, scholars, teachers, and critics in order to scale the project. Thus the title of our project, "From working prototype to distributed community." We learned a great deal in the course of the year, and have successfully worked in partnership with three entities: The Journal of Artists' Books (housed at Columbia College in Chicago), the Visual Studies Workshop Press and Archive (in Rochester, New York), and the Joan Flasch Collection at the School of the Chicago Art Institute, and a number of individuals. Our content will have more than doubled by the end of this cycle. We were assisted by additional funds from the Delmas Foundation ($15,000) that allowed us to have our partners pay interns and/or staff. (At approximately $10-15/hour wage, this is an allocation of 400-500 hours per partner over a calendar year, or, about 10 hours a week of time, including training, learning, corrections, and productivity.)

Because the working prototype was developed to provide online access to facsimiles of artists' books, but also to push critical thinking in the field, it includes rich metadata

descriptions of the works. Since artists' books are original works of art, they are often produced in limited editions that are difficult to access or even know about. Artists' books are complex works, and difficult to exhibit and difficult to study in reproduction. Artists' books have not generated as rich a critical or historical discussion as other experimental media (video for example), in part because of the difficulty of access, and in part because of the need for a specialized critical approach to their aesthetic properties. In creating an online collection, we chose to address all of these issues by creating facsimiles that are full scans of every page (including cover, edges, bindings, endsheets) with rich metadata designed to describe the particular features of books as works of art.

Our metadata was created through a series of working sessions with librarians and special collections curators, as well as with input from artists and scholars. We aimed to create a specialized, controlled vocabulary for bindings, materials, media, and other features of artists' books that will make the collection useful for teaching and research.

In the first part of the NEH funded project, we created a forms-based format for metadata creation. This has been useful for training purposes, particularly since we found that there were two parts to the learning curve for most new users or content developers: learning the conceptual framework of description and learning the technical skills for XML editing. The project is built in XML, the standard for data in online environments. It requires an introduction for the non-technical user, and some hand-holding in the first period of use. The X-Forms provided a training environment so that new users (artists or the interns with partners listed above) could get familiar with the way books are described in our metadata without having to work directly in XML. After acquiring some familiarity, they often switched to using an XML editor, since that seemed easier that mediating through the extra step of the X-Forms.

A second piece of our NEH proposal involved collection of metadata from existing sources and cross-walking existing data into a larger database. We conducted some discussions and consultations with special collections cataloguers. Nina Schneider at the New York Public Library put together a detailed analysis of some of the challenges facing the cross-walk project from Marc records to ABsOnline metadata. This effort may be served by using some of the protocols that are being used in the NINES project hosted at UVa. They have successfully integrated Marc records and metadata from online repositories into a single aggregated searchable database. We are still looking at this as a possible final phase of the current cycle, but may also put it off for future development.

The final piece of our proposed project was to increase the user base and protocols for review and vetting or materials. Our collective efforts have been rewarding, and the partnerships with institutions and a handful of individuals have worked effectively in making curatorial decisions. Our workflow and work-in-progress were tracked in a Collab (collaborative work) environment and decisions about what to put into the collection were managed through a shared wish list and suggestions passed by the advisory board. Given the rate at which books are being put into the collection, this has proved a relatively simple part of the process.

But the reality of the amount of work involved in the creation of the image files, metadata, and information architecture (GDMS and zoomify files) has been sobering. On average, it takes about 20-30 hours per book, and that is if the book work is not more than about 48 pages. Scanning at a high level of resolution is time consuming work that requires skill and attention. Managing workflow from distributed partners has involved mailing many disks and transferring files and metadata through laborious procedures. In essence, we are customizing our information structure for each book through a set of automated but tedious procedures. This would not scale very well unless there were regular, trained staff to handle the work.

We still have some funds left in our budget and are organizing a session to review our experience and make a set of recommendations for ArtistsBooksOnline 2.0. These recommendations will address the challenges of scale, reassess our user base, and think again about our contributor community. For the project to scale, we need to do several things. First, we need to create a technical plan for incorporation of metadata from existing repositories (the piece of the project we have not yet addressed). We need to see if there is enough justification for this in terms of use. I continue to think that this would make good sense and allow us to search artists' books collections at least in a national framework. But we need the participation of a librarian, preferably one with an interest in artists' books, and a technical work plan that assesses feasibility before we begin. Second, we need to rework the metadata and radically simplify the structure. A much simpler set of fields, basic information, and more intuitive way to describe books (as if they are being held in the hand, as it were, and described) needs to be combined with suggestions for use of controlled vocabulary (to provide searchability as the project scales). Our metadata scheme was based on bibliographical standards and is daunting for the average user or cataloger. We are considering the creation of a wiki-type commons that would allow contributions that require minimal hands-on work by ArtistsBooksOnline staff (a graduate student and an undergraduate, both working about ten hours a week), or else migrating the materials into the Internet Archive's Open Library site so that we would not have the management responsibility.

As a longterm goal, we are hoping to make ArtistsBooksOnline continue to thrive and develop as an online collection by building a space for critical and scholarly work including creation of archival collections and interpretative functions.