Artists' Books Online

http://artistsbooksonline.org

Johanna Drucker

Questions about this project have come up in many quarters, and *JAB* kindly offered me the opportunity to give an introduction to the mission, methods, and goals of this project. I hope that those of you reading will feel invited to participate by proposing contributions. The structure of the project, its technical underpinnings, are now stable and almost all of the functionality we wanted to build into the site is in place. So, contact us with queries, though reading through this introduction may help you understand what is involved in the project and thus how your contributions could best fit.

Artists' Books Online, (or ABsOnline) is a digital collection meant to promote research and study in the field by providing access to materials and creating a repository of critical commentary. To achieve that goal, we built ABsOnline in XML, the basic code for digital collections. Because we developed the project within a library context, working with the University of Virginia's digital library units, we had the benefit of technical advice that allowed us to create a project that conforms to professional standards in conceptual and technical aspects. We did the work ourselves, so we know every bit of the technical infrastructure, and it has taken about three and a half years to go from our initial conception to this stage of functionality. I think that puzzles many people for whom the distinction between a web site and an archive or repository isn't clear – for folks who are used to using HTML or even Dreamweaver and putting up a web page in a half an hour, complete with scans and links to images, the idea that it takes years to develop information infrastructure is a puzzlement. I'll outline some of that history in a bit more detail below (see Technical background), but since the general reader is probably more interested in practical and conceptual issues, I'll start with these.

Goals and function

Practically speaking, our goal has been to get a collection of exemplary works up online. I began with my own books, not because they are necessarily exemplary, but because I think my situation is typical: I've produced a significant body of work over a thirty year period and almost all of it is out of print, hard to find, and difficult to access. I wanted my books to be available for anyone who wanted to know them. Because my books have a lot of text, they have to be read. That means providing different levels of image resolution so that someone can actually access these pages in a workable manner. With an advisory board made of artists, librarians, and scholar-critics, we put together a list of books that would work as great examples, and began putting the

collection together. Unlike my earlier provocative stance vis a vis a canon, I am simply trying to put some books up and talk about them in ways that will provide models for thinking critically and historically in this field.

The structure of the site baffles some people, in part because its structure follows bibliographic conventions unfamiliar to most artists: work/edition/object. In those conventions, three levels of description are structured that have very different characteristics. At the highest level, a "work" is the basic conception within which an edition is realized. But a

Screen capture of Artists' Books Online Home page
http://artistsbooksonline.org

work – say, *A Humument* [Tom Phillips]—can involve wall pieces, exhibitions, even performances and readings, as well as the work and conceptualization that links all of these aspects within a common aesthetic frame. The "work" of *A Humument* is much larger and complicated than any single edition. A "work" can be described by a project statement, and it can be placed in an aesthetic tradition, an art or intellectual movement, and a cultural frame. An "edition" is the produced expression, it takes material form, and it can be copyrighted (a "work" isn't protected by copyright, because it is an idea, not a material expression of an idea). An edition of an artist's book is the instantiation – it has physical characteristics, design features, a production history, and can be commented on critically for all of its complex intertextual relations. An "object" is a single example that you have in front of you and from which you are making your description. Any individual copy of an editioned work might have inscriptions, or marks of wear, or contain a misprinted page, and the history of acquisition and provenance is part of the object's identity.

These three levels structure ABsOnline, along with a full set of scans of the book from fore-edge and spine through every single page of the book (or every aspect if it is not quite a codex). Producing the files for a single book takes about 6-8 hours including scanning and writing the metadata (about which more in a moment). Translating these files into an online accessible file requires a few other steps to put the files into the repository.

We could have made a much simpler structure – more like a standard library record with name, title, publisher, date, and a few keywords or subject headings. We chose instead to insist that metadata (the description of the object that forms the files for ABsOnline) can be useful as a way to shape critical discourse. So our metadata falls into several types. First is basic information (agent, title, location, dates, measurements, etc.) that is usually clear from observation. Second we have many fields with what is called "controlled vocabulary." In these fields, for instance, "movement" or "publication tradition" or "media" we have culled lists from standard library cataloguing sources (AAT and LCSH) or, where this vocabulary is missing, we put together a list of terms from within the artists book community (look at "binding types" and you'll see the result of long conversations around the conference table). Finally, we have what we call "authored" fields. These are entries that require an author-attribute (think of this as a byline) and are highly subjective and often critical or descriptive interpretations. Among the design features, for instance, we ask for information about typography or imagery, or about aspects of a book like sequence, or development, or turnings. By asking for this, we are asking anyone making the file to reflect on these aspects of the book in hand. Why is *Nurse Duck* an interesting visual work when many other books inspired by graphic novels are less so? The answer in part can be elicited from the description of these design features.

Ahead, we want to create critical richness in the site by getting contributions to the authored fields. Critical analysis of these works would benefit from conversational exchanges among different authors making different points about how a book works and why its formal and conceptual and material elements relate intertextually. To create these exchanges we invite anyone interested to propose to contribute a critical analysis of a work already online – a paragraph or two in a word document, sent to us, will work fine.

Screen capture of Artists' Books Online Work-level page
http://artistsbooksonline.org/works/howt.xml

But for those confused by the structure of ABsOnline, I can only suggest that the site was built to conform to standards that seemed to us to be useful for setting artists' books up as worthy of the same kind of serious consideration as other literary and artistic works. The issue of controlled vocabulary and the structured nature of data entry comes down to the benefits of long term aggregation and search. Though the amount of information on the site is still fairly minimal, if it grows, then being able to search across any of the terms or fields will create possibilities for scholarship in this field that are of a very different kind. Imagine being able to trace the relations between production and acquisition of a particular artist's work, or the dissemination of a binding style or type, or the influence of political events on the production of works across the field. Though we are a long way from the critical mass of material that would make these kinds of analyses useful, the way the site is structured will make this possible in ways that make it diametrically opposed to a web site.

Technical background

How is ABsOnline different from a simple HTML-only web site? Such a web site doesn't have the capabilities of managing fielded search functions, or of providing access to the scale and level of images we are putting into the collection. I could have scanned pages from my books, stuck them in a web site in HTML, linked their descriptions to the images and provided basic information. Such a web site would create only a single set of relationships through which one could navigate. Not only is such and approach limited functionally, but it also has limits of scale. A digital collection like ABsOnline, by contrast, is like a library collection in traditional media. It contains many, many objects, and has a flexibility and extensibility that is not limited by structure or scale. An archive can have 10,000 images and files and be terabyte sized. A statically-produced web site at that size would be unworkable. Above all, the structured data aspect of a repository provides handles and tags for analysis and searching. Imagine you are going through a web site and thinking about how much you love the image of a certain book because of the way it uses inkjet printing with woodblock overlays. Now, how can you ask the web site if other books using this technique exist? Especially ones that have images of machines in them? Static web sites have no structured data or metadata through which to

manage such a query. ABsOnline has an enormous metadata structure, and this is what makes it unique.

It took three and a half years and about $50,000 to make ABsOnline what it is today. The $ went for staff, a bit of technical consulting, and travels for the planning conferences and board consultations. This is not a lot of money for such a project. The staff, including myself, created the project from scratch, using XML to design and build the core information architecture. XML is not proprietary. It is not a software application. It is the code that is the lingua franca of the net. Anything built in XML can be read by a browser. It is robust, has the promise of longevity, and is not platform specific. To create such a project you start by creating a DTD, a document type description, that is a set of rules for the kinds of documents you will and can make in XML. Our DTD says, every file you make about artists' books has some required fields and some optional ones, some of these require an author attribution and others do not. From this rule set, all our XML files about the books are generated.

Image scanning is also standardized to meet library conventions and professional levels, and our file naming sequence is required if the delivery of images is to work. In addition to the metadata files that have information about the books, we have other information structures for storage and delivery, a kind of shelving system, for the images at the display, browse, and reading levels. All of these files live on a server and are processed through software that generate a display through the use of style sheets that take the information in the metadata files and turn it into a screen image. Delivering all of this in a web environment depends on servers and software that are part of our library and information technology services. At that level, the archive is part of a secure system, access to this is limited to system administrators, and though we have responsibility for anything in our own files that doesn't work properly, we are dependent on the library and its relation to our university information services groups for continued functioning.

Screen capture of Artists' Books Online XML markup
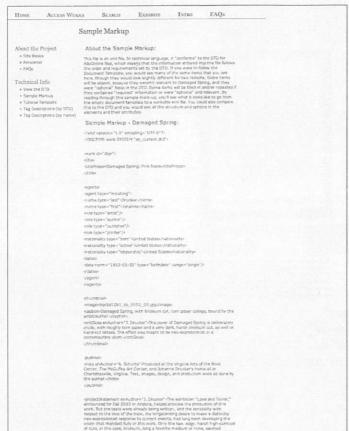http://artistsbooksonline.org/sampleMarkup.html

Our search and indexing capabilities came relatively recently, as did the final design of a forms-based entry to generate the XML documents in which our metadata is structured. As in any such project, hours and hours disappear into production and troubleshooting. We've had the great advantage of a highly sophisticated library staff, and I have had the good fortune to have two project manager/designers, Annie Schütte and now Eric Rettberg, who both had an aptitude for the work of creating and managing this project.

Goals and next steps

For ABsOnline to develop, we have to create a community of contributors and users. We will continue to manage the site and its technical infrastructure since it lives within the University of Virginia system. But content development – scanning, writing, commenting – has to come from a broader group. We are treating the collection like a curated collection, with ourselves and the Advisory Board as the consulting group past which any proposals have to go. We want to build in a sense of peer review and vetting, and so no aspect of the site will be automated in a wiki sort of manner. We want to build into ABsOnline some kind of authoring environment for creating essays and exhibitions so that detailed analysis of works in the collection can take place. That is a future goal, but not outside of the realm of possibility. In the meantime, we are working with JAB, the Flasch Collection at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, and Visual Studies Workshop Press in Rochester to create a beta test of distributed workflow. What that means is that we are trying to see if it works to train people in the use of ABsOnline, get them to understand the rational of the metadata, learn the scanning conventions, and put up books from their collections online. Some intellectual property issues come up, and we have release form and permissions form we use. We try to contact every artist, and if someone finds their work online and wants it removed, we will take down all but the metadata (which is our intellectual property). But I would hope most artists would realize that it is an act of homage and appreciation that prompted us to put one of their books up, and that the value of the work increases as a result, not the opposite.

ABsOnline has taken about 3000 hours of work so far, if I had to estimate the amount of my time, staff time, internship time, and library staff contributions. Just the fact that any book takes 5-8 hours for scanning, metadata, etc. gives some idea of the work involved, and the development of the technical infrastructure and conceptual infrastructure took about 10 hours a week over the last three and a half years (including all staff, teaching, training, etc. time). My time and energy have always been donated, and I took no $ from a grants or support to pay myself for any time involved in ABsOnline. We had $40,000 from the University, $15,000 in an initial Delmas grant, and now have another Delmas grant to pay interns at our three partnering institutions ($5000 each), and an NEH grant to continue to pay for staff, interns, and training at UVa (a $30,000 grant, though we only get $19,000 of this, for various reasons that have to do with the University). This funding will take us through June 2008. By winter of this year I will be making a decision about whether to continue the project or simply tie it up and put it into the library as a digital collection and leave it. As an extra project on top of other things, it may simply not be a high enough priority, so unless it engages the community as an ongoing project, I may let it live in a static state as a proof of concept of the way an online repository can be built to provide access and promote critical engagement with this field.

Contact me directly or through ABsOnline if you are interested in participating: artistsbooks@virginia.edu, jrd8e@virginia.edu.

Johanna Drucker is the Robertson Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia. She is a scholar, poet, artist, letterpress printer, and has been making her artist's books since 1975.

Announcements

Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, & the Book

The conference *Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, and the Book* will be held at Yale University on March 13 & 14, 2008. Participants include Johanna Drucker, Steve Clay, Buzz Spector, John Yau, Coracle Press, Ninja Press, Sutton Hoo Press, Ugly Duckling Presse and more.

Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, and the Book will include companion exhibitions at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Arts of the Book Collection, Arts Library beginning in January 2008. The exhibitions will include a broad display of books, broadsides, and ephemera exploring the ways in which poets, publishers, artists, and printers have navigated the intersection of poetry and art in books and other printed formats. The exhibitions will emphasize the roles of creative and collaborative processes involved in uniting visual image, poetic text, and print.

The exhibitions will consider the ways in which poetry and the visual arts interact in print, their intersections and connections, their shared context and their potentially conflicting functions. Though many poets, artists, and publishers cling fiercely to the idea of the book as a sacred cultural object, their approaches and their interpretations of the term and concept differ vastly. The books and printed materials in *Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, and the Book* will demonstrate the wide variety of ways poets, artists, and publishers have collaborated to explore the book, its intimacy, portability, and physicality and to assert its position as a multifaceted historical and contemporary method of communication and an evolving cultural object. Both exhibitions will also explore questions of textuality, verbal and visual metaphor making, poetic language and the physicality of texts and books, and a variety of related issues.