This study examines artists’ books in the context of libraries. In addition to a review of the literature, qualitative interviews were conducted with five individuals who are responsible for collections of artists’ books in academic libraries. The interviews focused on current practices and procedures for handling artists’ books, as well as professional opinion regarding standards and guidelines for collecting, processing, preserving, and managing collections of artists’ books. Topics explored in depth include defining the term *artists’ books*, reasons for collecting artists’ books in libraries, information-seeking behaviors related to artists’ books, how they are treated differently from other material in the collection, the debate over national or local standards and guidelines, and future needs of such collections. This paper discusses current professional thought about artists’ books and provides a foundation for future inquiry.

Headings:

Artists’ books.

Libraries -- Special collections -- Artists' books.

Art libraries.
ARTISTS' BOOKS IN LIBRARIES:
CURRENT PRACTICES & THE ISSUE OF STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

by
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A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

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Approved by:

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Introduction

Artists’ books are a relatively new format that has found its way into library collections to support the curriculum issues or broaden holdings; but issues relating to management and care, preservation, cataloging, access, promotion and display have continued to challenge such collecting. Because artists’ books vary so much from one to another and because they cross the line between art object and book, librarians and other library staff have often made decisions about artists’ books on a case-by-case basis at the local level. They have to consider a whole host of issues dealing with artists’ books, running the gamut from varying sizes, non-traditional formats and materials (often including organic or other materials that may cause damage to other items in the collection) to access and security concerns.

This paper will address current practices and issues related to artists’ books in libraries. In addition to a review of the literature, topics to be discussed in-depth include defining the term *artists’ books*, reasons for collecting artists’ books in libraries, information-seeking behaviors related to artists’ books, how they are treated differently from other material in library collections, the debate over national or local standards and guidelines, and future needs for such collections.

Five qualitative interviews were conducted during which questions ranged from practice to theory. I was interested in finding out how librarians define artists’ books, how they make collection decisions, where they seek information when making such decisions, and how they have defined collection rules and guidelines at the local level. I
was also interested in their opinion of local or national standards or guidelines for the
collection of artists’ books in libraries. Although each collection I visited was different, I
discovered the individuals with whom I spoke agreed on many issues and share similar
concerns regarding their collections of artists’ books.
What are Artists’ Books?

According to Jae Jennifer Rossman at Yale University, the “general consensus [about artists’ books] is that there is no one definition” (p. [1]). In fact, librarians, art historians, artists and scholars have been debating over a definition since artists’ books began arriving in libraries nearly 30 years ago. A survey of art librarians conducted in 2000 by researchers from Indiana University attempted to unify varying definitions and resulted in the following description of artists’ books:

Artists’ books can take many forms, among them a traditional codex, a stack of playing cards, a flip book, a tunnel book, and a scroll. Such forms push the boundaries of traditional reading while maintaining the intimate relationship that a book fosters between object and reader. These unusual books may find homes in the collections of fine arts libraries, challenging standard methodologies of organization and care. (Chemero et al. 22-5)

In other words, artists use the form or concept of a traditional book to create works of art that cross the lines between art object and book.¹ Although some artists’ books appear to be quite similar to traditional books,² many vary from the traditional book in size, material, fragility and uniqueness. Some artists’ books vary so far from the traditional book, that it may be difficult for some to understand just how the artist understands his or her creation as a book rather than as a sculpture. It is precisely that blur between art object and book that creates confusion and eludes definition. To define artists’ books is like defining art – everyone seems to have a different opinion. And it is not only

¹ For examples of artists’ books, see Appendix A.
² See Figs. 5, 6 in Appendix A.
librarians who are searching for definition, but also curators, artists, and scholars alike.

The following is a sample of competing (yet at times overlapping) definitions:

Artists’ books are, like any other medium, a means of conveying art ideas from the artists to the viewer/reader. Unlike most other media they are available to all at low cost. They do not need a special place to be seen. They are not valuable except for the ideas they contain… Art shows come and go but books stay around for years. They are works themselves, but not reproductions of works.
– Sol LeWitt, artist (Ekdahl 243)

Artists’ books thrive on the rhythmical turning of pages, on tactile as well as visual exploration.
– Anne Anninger, curator (Why Artists’ Books [2])

Artists’ books has come to be used most widely to denote the whole phenomenon of books in which the artist has assumed the role of author, either in the traditional literary sense, or in the sense that the artist is the author of the book as a work of art.
– Clive Phillpot, curator (Turner 4)

…”[B]ook art’ can be seen as an art of action, a kind of happening or theatre, concerned with the situation in which the work is experienced, and which demands the reader’s participation. The book of course remains at the center of such a situation, but the experience of the situation itself is controlled by the reader.
– P. Buchler (Turner 9)

You can always fall back on the Duchampian prop.: ‘It’s an artist’s book if an artist made it, or if an artist says it is.
– Lucy R. Lippard (Lyons 49)

Visual books offer fruitful possibilities for the continuity, connection, and unfolding of images. Each image is complete in itself, yet linked to every other through the structure of the book. A book reads, travels, exposes, and tells a story. Text and visual image speak in parallel, through association, synthesis, or divergence. The reader is transported beyond what is written in words or shown in pictures. The book is a house. It contains and describes a world, creates its own space; it is touched, held, and opened with intimate pleasure in the hands and time of the viewer.
– Brian D. Cohen, artist (Why Artists’ Books [15])

Although anxious to avoid too restrictive a definition, our broad understanding of an artists’ bookwork in the context of this collection is: a book (i.e. normally a number of pages attached to each other in some way) wholly, or primarily conceived by (though not necessarily actually made/printed by) an artist, and usually produced in a cheap, multiple edition for wide dissemination.
– Tate Gallery Library (Turner 5)

Books are the most formal of my work, but also the most personal. Books are intimate objects that are enhanced by the viewer’s participation with the piece. In giving form and voice to my experience, books become conduits. They are, then, a leap of faith, a way of tracing memory and history, of making visible that which is evanescent.
– Deborah Davidson, artist (Why Artists’ Books [11])

The distinctive features of artist’s books include the sequential character of the narrative, both verbal and visual; the integration of form and content; and the desire to communicate an idea to the reader/viewer.
– Krystyna Wasserman, curator (1997, [1])

The list of definitions goes on and on, and nearly every book, article, exhibition catalog and website provides a slightly different explanation for artists’ books. For the purposes of this paper, I am going to default to the Duchampian definition that if an artist calls something an artists’ book, then it is an artists’ book. During the Results & Observations section of this paper, I will also discuss some of the definitions used by my subjects, and their implications.

Artists’ books have grown out of the tradition of fine book making and an interest in sharing art with the masses that has evolved over the past two centuries. The earliest predecessor of the artists’ book could arguably be the “fine press” book. These books were printed with letterpress typography with fine bookbinding and classic, refined illustrations. Because such care was put into their creation, they were often printed in
small editions (never more than a few hundred), typically for private collectors and art dealers. The attention to the aesthetic merits of fine press books is arguably a precursor for the notion many book artists have that the aesthetic quality of the object they create is an impetus in itself for its creation.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, William Blake sought freedom from publishers and the letterpress method. As a poet and artist, he was interested in producing books of his own that would unite his writing and art into one creative effort. With experimentation, Blake invented a new printing method in the early 1790’s that allowed for better integration between text and art. This technique allowed Blake to print his handwritten texts with embellishment and narrative motifs, followed by hand tinting done by his wife, Catherine Boucher (Eisenman 99). The end result was a product that was created by mechanical printing, yet had the aesthetic appearance of hand written text. This notion of creative independence from commercial publishers plays an important role in the production of twentieth century artists’ books (Rossman [5]).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tradition of creating livre d’artiste became popular, particularly in Paris with artists like Matisse and Picasso. Supported by growing interest in the Art Nouveau movement and attention to design, artists were interested in pushing art and graphic design to the next level. The livre d’artiste adopted many of the classic elements of fine press books, but rather than incorporate traditional illustrations, they contained art images made by well-known artists. Being able to sell large editions of these books proved to be quite profitable for artists and a way to reach the growing middle class. (Hobson 16)
In addition to the tradition of *livre d’artiste* and fine press books, Peter A. Wick also points to the renewed interest in the ancient craft of bookbinding taking place in nineteenth century England (*Artists of the Book* 4-5). He points to the Arts and Crafts Movement as another historical antecedent to the artists’ books. Members of the Arts and Crafts Movement protested the Industrial Revolution and embraced all things made by hand. There was a renewed interest in skilled craftsmanship and they lived by the motto that “art becomes a craft, and craft an art” (*Artists of the Book* 4-5). One of the key players in book arts during this time was William Morris and his Kelmscott Press. Under his direction, the press produced books revered for their fine craftsmanship and attention to detail – something, he believed, that could never be replicated by machines in the Industrial Revolution. The interest in skilled craftsmanship in the form of hand-sewn binding, hand-made paper, and more, is another element many book artists strive for today.

With the conceptual groundwork laid, it would be half a century later that artists’ books emerged in the art world. It has been argued that Dieter Roth, an Icelandic artist, created the first contemporary artists’ book with his 1957 *Ideogramme*, which appeared in an issue of the review *Material*. Peter Wick describes it as “a pamphlet in black paper wrappers with sparse playful designs composed on the typewriter.” At the same time, New York artists were becoming more interested in displays of popular culture, including photography, comics, graffiti, and advertising. So there was little time before artists began embracing the traditional book form as a new mode of artistic expression. With the number of artists producing artists’ books growing, groups supporting their efforts began to develop all over the city, such as the Center for Book Arts and the Visual Arts
Center. Publishers began showing interest in artists’ books and several artists secured grants from the National Endowment for the Arts to support their work. By the 1980’s and 1990’s, artists’ books were a mainstay of the art world. (*Artists of the Book 5*)

Because artists’ books have gained a new presence in the art and library worlds, many prominent collections have been growing in the United States and in Europe. Most notable are the Library of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which acquired the extensive Franklin Furnace Archive of Artists’ Books in 1993; the Kohler Art Library at the University of Wisconsin; the Rhode Island School of Design Library; the Library at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and the Library and Resource Center at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. There are also small teaching collections of artists’ books at many colleges and universities with art curricula. In 1999, an Art Libraries Society (ARLIS) survey of twenty-seven libraries documented that the average collection size of artists’ books was 1,096 items, but one of the largest, the Library at MoMA, included over 9,000 books (Chemero et al. 22). As library collections grow, the literature on artists’ books also grows, and the next section of this paper will outline some of the major currents in the literature as it stands today.
Literature Review

There is a substantial amount of literature dealing with artists’ books, considering it is only about 30 years old. “Artists books” first appeared as an index term in *Art Index* with its November 1973 – October 1974 issue (Klima 83). Much of the early articles focused on trying to describe and understand this new art form. There followed works published to coincide with exhibitions of artists’ books, and eventually long monographs devoted to defining artists’ books and highlighting examples. However, most of this literature appears within the realm of art history and art theory. Within the library science literature, mention of artists’ books is more scattered and there is vast room for further research to be done.

This literature review will look at the literature in six categories: (1) texts aimed at describing and understanding artists’ books, (2) exhibition catalogs and texts published in conjunction with exhibits, (3) anthologies and surveys, (4) works that show-case collections, (5) documentation of problems associated with artists’ books in libraries, and (6) general guides and handbooks for art librarians which cover artists’ books to a certain extent. These categories are not mutually exclusive. There exists some overlap of information among these categories, particularly when it comes to discussing definitions as well as addressing problems and issues related to artists’ books, however each category tends to offer the literature something different.
Describing and Understanding Artists’ Books

From the very beginning of the literature, there have been scholars, curators, and artists attempting to describe and understand what exactly artists’ books are. However, this literature is sparser in the field of library science. One of the earliest comprehensive works on artists’ books in the context of libraries appeared in the December 1982 issue of Art Documentation, which the Museum of Modern Art’s Clive Phillpot edited. This issue includes a series of articles and commentary from librarians and curators, including the acquisition process for artists’ books, access and publicity, descriptions of growing collections, and an introduction to the artists’ book store Printed Matter. Perhaps the most useful part of the issue was the Bibliography of Information Sources compiled by Janet Dalberto, which reached back as early as 1964. Above all else, this issue of Art Documentation was a group effort to try and understand artists’ books and share information with one another, and the first comprehensive work on artists’ books in the library science literature.

There followed a handful of papers and articles written to help understand artists’ books. For example, in “The Production Book vs. The One-of-a Kind,” Keith Smith outlines the difference between the two types of artists’ books, as well as characteristics common to each. In the same issue of Art Papers, Betty Bright’s article “Artists’ Books: Art’s Least Fragile Vehicle,” serves as a rallying piece on why artists should use the book form as a method of communication, and the importance this new format plays in our society. In another article that appeared in the August 1991 issue of The New Library Scene, librarian Maggie Yax was compelled to write about her excitement at discovering artists’ books and her attempt to experience and understand them. These three works are
just an example of the scattering of articles that appeared in the literature. There were many others, each of which offered a definition for the term *artists’ book* as well as some insight or commentary related to this new media.

Finally, in the mid-1990’s, Johanna Drucker stepped to the forefront of the artists’ book literature. Both a scholar and book artist, Drucker’s publication of “Artists’ Books and the Cultural Status of the Book” in the Winter 1994 *Journal of Communication*, had made her mark as one of the preeminent artists’ book scholars. This article argued for the permanence of books in our culture at a time when new developments in technology spurred thoughts of snuggling up in bed with a laptop-type ‘book’ rather than a good old paperback novel. Drucker argued of the importance of the book, including the introduction of artists’ books in the 20th century, which she argued, “define a very specific zone of activity in terms of communication – one that has a relation to independent publishing, fine arts printmaking, and traditional book crafts, but which cannot be comfortably contained within the perceptual parameters of any of these fields” (12). With this scholarly argument, the literature of artists’ books took a turn from commentary and ‘light’ articles, to serious theoretical statements about the importance of the artists’ book. A year later, Drucker published *The Century of Artists’ Books*, a book that is still considered to be one of the primary texts in understanding artists’ books. She again highlights the cultural importance of artists’ books, with greater detail than her *Journal of Communication* article provided. There have been a handful of additional texts aimed at understanding artists’ books, most notably *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists’ Books* by Renee Riese Hubert and Judd. D. Hubert, but Drucker’s *The Century of Artists’ Books* remains the first source to which to turn for information.
As the growth of technology increases, there has been more and more discussion of virtual artists’ books, which can be found online or on DVD. Very few librarians are collecting virtual artists’ books, but there has been growing discussion in the literature. A key article in this area is Doro Boehme’s 2000 article in *Art Documentation*, “What is It? A Discussion of Virtual Artists’ Books.” This article sets out to define virtual artists’ books (a feat even more confusing when analog artists’ books are nearly impossible to define), as well as present a discussion of space and access issues.

Although the literature on understanding artists’ books is vast, it still remains largely a part of the art historical and art theory literature. There are articles in the library science journals, but the more definitive work remains in art journals. For librarianship, however, this is suitable, as librarians are used to accessing information from all scholarly fields in order to piece together their own understanding of scholarship. However, to seek out a single definition is not possible, as nearly every scholar seems to offer forth a slightly different version.

**Exhibition Catalogs and Texts Published in Conjunction with Exhibits**

Texts and catalogs printed in conjunction with exhibitions serve as a wonderful source for information about artists’ books. They often include introductory texts and essays, which can help to understand artists’ books, and they offer illustrations that highlight many of the characteristics and issues discussed in the literature. Some of these texts are long and scholarly, for example Riva Castleman’s *A Century of Artists Books* (not to be confused with Drucker’s similarly titled book) and Robert Flynn Johnson’s *Artists’ Books in the Modern Era 1870-2000*, which includes many livre d’artiste as well
as artists’ books. Published in conjunction with exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, respectively, these two catalogs include a wealth of information for understanding artists’ books. They also serve to highlight the wide variety between books created by different artists.

In addition to large texts, there are countless smaller texts and pamphlets that highlight exhibition materials. Since exhibitions are a traditional method for publicizing art and educating the public (Dalberto 1990, 10), corresponding publications can be equally valuable for publicizing collection holdings. The National Museum of Women in the Arts, for example, has published small catalogs in conjunction with their annual artists’ book exhibits. These catalogs help to publicize their wonderful collection to the rest of the world, as well as to provide a well rounded understanding of what exactly artists’ books are.

But again, these catalogs only serve to understand artists’ books in an art historical or art theoretical sense and issues pertaining to librarianship are entirely absent from these texts.

**Anthologies and Surveys**

These texts are essentially designed to help understand what artists’ books are, though their primary purpose is to collect together and synthesize information already available in the literature. The first excellent anthology of artists’ books literature is Joan Lyon’s 1985 *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*. This text includes essays by key scholars aimed at, once again, understanding artists’ books. And, once again, the information and discussion between scholars in her work is interesting, but limited to art
historical and theoretical literature. Again, information related specifically to libraries is largely missing from her anthology.

In 1998, Stephan Klima published the first and only survey of literature dealing with artists’ books. In it, he eloquently synthesizes the ongoing debates surrounding artists’ books. As he sees it, there are three issues involved in the debate: “[1] definition; [2] the book considered an object and its challenge to a new kind of reading – the debate’s implicit political act; and, [3] the desire to challenge an art establishment – the debate’s explicit political act” (7). However, like the majority of artists’ book scholars, his survey deals primarily with the texts from an art historical and art theoretical perspective. He does not include literature from other fields, most specifically from the field of library science.

Finally, in 2000, scholars at Indiana University conducted a survey of twenty-seven art libraries to understand their artists’ book collection, cataloging, and preservation practices. The results of the study were published and explained in an article in *Art Documentation* by Andrea Chemero et al., “How Libraries Collect and Handle Artists’ Books.” Although a short article, it is ripe with statistics and information about how art librarians are dealing with artists’ books in their collections. Some discussion is made regarding problems with artists’ books, but the commentary is kept brief and big issues are often resolved in a sentence or two. Nonetheless, this survey marks an interest in scholarly questioning of librarians and how they incorporate artists’ books into their collections and practices.
Works That Show-Case Collections

In the library science literature on artists’ books, there seems to be a trend of highlighting collection strengths and weaknesses. These articles are a good way for librarians to communicate with one another about what artists’ books are in their collection and how they handle them. They can be a foundation for discussion, but are never definitive in describing best practices or the precise way things should be done.

The library at Virginia Commonwealth University has a large collection of artists’ books, over 3,000 in 2003. Over the years, librarians from Virginia Commonwealth University have published accounts of their collection. In a 1983 *Drexel Library Quarterly*, Janet Dalberto published “Collecting Artists’ Books,” which not only described her own artists’ book collection and collection practices, but also offered some argument as to why certain practices were better than others. Seven years later in a 1990 *Art Papers*, Harriet Runkle published “Book Art Collection, VCU & Davi Det Hompson: a Profile,” which describes how the book art collection began, but spends more time discussing the artist Hompson’s work than library issues. And finally in a 1993 *C&RL News*, Betsy P. Pittman and John H. Whaley Jr. published “Collecting Book Art,” which took the same approach as Dalberto’s article in describing the collection, but offered less commentary on library practice and more commentary on strengths of the collection.

There have also been articles highlighting the collection at The Atlanta College of Art (Hutsell) and the University of Cincinnati (Carlin and Varady), and many articles highlighting the larger collections such as the Museum of Modern Art. For example, Janis Ekdahl published a useful article in a 1999 *INSPEL* titled “Artists’ Books and Beyond: The Library of the Museum of Modern Art as a Curatorial and Research
Resource.” This article describes the collection, and follows with a discussion of cataloging and storage issues. Since the artists’ book collection at the Museum of Modern Art is considered one of the best in the world, Ekdahl’s discussion could serve as a guideline of sorts for smaller institutions.

**Documentation of Problems Associated with Artists’ Books in Libraries**

Several of the articles mentioned in the section above also contain information relating to this section, which deals with the documentation of problems associated with artists’ books in libraries. Although the articles above deal mostly with highlights and descriptions of specific collections, the texts in this section deal mostly with artists’ books in general and the problems they pose for librarians.

One of the primary problems for librarians dealing with artists’ books is that of cataloging. Catalogers have to describe an artwork with a bibliographic utility. There simply isn’t a proper method of describing the physical nature of many artists’ books with only bibliographic description. There has been a flurry of articles discussing this cataloging problem, for example, Timothy Shipe’s “The Monographic Cataloger and the Artist’s Book: The Ideal Reader.” In it, he embraces the challenges presented by artists’ books for catalogers. In his conclusion, he writes, “Armed with only a set of rules and standards designed for the traditional book format, the cataloger finds himself or herself faced with the task of describing, for example, a collection of texts printed in a pair of shoes. The cataloger must understand and describe this work as being in some sense a book. In taking up this challenge, the cataloger becomes the artists’ coconspirator and the work’s ideal reader.” Like most of the articles discussing cataloging problems, this
cataloger is excited by the challenge and interested in pursuing new alternatives to bibliographic description.

Another major issue for libraries with artists’ books is the issue of storage and conservation. However, the literature in this area tends to be very weak, if not non-existent. The problems cannot be clearly defined, since each artist’s book has unique size or material constraints. Occasionally, scholars will mention these issues, such as Ekdahl in her writing about the Museum of Modern Art. But otherwise, librarians are left to his or her own devices to seek information from local curators or conservators. There is almost nothing for them to refer to in the library science literature.

Another problem with artists’ books that has emerged in the literature is the issue of distribution. Although there is very little written about problems of shipment and distribution, it does appear in Judith A. Hoffberg’s 1990 article in *Art Papers*, “Distribution and Its Discontents: The Perennial Problem of Artists’ Books.” Hoffberg outlines the history of distribution from artist to collection, decade by decade, followed by a resource list of artists’ book distributors. She feels the problem with weak distribution results in the problem of poor public relations and communication. What Hoffberg is advocating is better distribution of artists’ books to libraries through improved communication and organization.

**General Guides and Handbooks for Art Librarians**

Because the literature of artists’ books is so weak in library science, librarians may have to consult general guides and handbooks for information about artists’ books. Although these books can highlight a wide variety of materials found in art libraries, they
almost always have a statement or two about artists’ books. For example, Sheila S. Intner and Jean Weihs’ 1998 *Special Libraries: A Cataloging Guide* discussed artists’ books under their “Special Types of Materials” section. However, the information presented is not very complete; rather they mention that catalogers will most likely face challenges and have to create original records for artists’ books. They do not provide any guidance for exactly how to do so. Other examples of a general guides are Philip Pacey’s 1985 *A Reader in Art Librarianship* and Betty Jo Irvine’s 1991 *Facilities Standards for Art Libraries and Visual Resources Collections*. Again, these works only mention artists’ books in passing, and do not provide any real strong guidance for librarians, rather they help flesh out the context of art libraries, in which most contain collections of artists’ books. The Association of College and Research Libraries offers guidelines for special collections, but again, nothing specific for artists’ books.

Although literature about artists’ books is strong in art history and art theory, it remains full of holes in library science. Librarians have little to fall back on besides their own subject specialties, training and each other.
Methodology

Five individuals were interviewed in this study in order to understand current collection practices for artists’ books in libraries, as well as professional opinions regarding standards and guidelines for these practices. “Pam” and “Mary” are head librarians at art libraries in academic settings. “Claudia” is a curator at a museum, and had previously been the director of the museum library. “Susie” is an assistant archivist in the special collections department of an academic library. And “Jaime” is the head of a special collections department of an academic library. Four of the individuals have MLS degrees, and the fifth is currently enrolled in an MLS program. All but one also has a background or additional specialty in art. All individuals were chosen because their job responsibilities require them to work with artists’ books on a regular, if not constant, basis. Additionally, they were located within driving distance from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in order for me to be able to visit each location. Although this is a small sample with geographical limitations, it still provides a sense as to what some professionals are currently thinking about artists’ books and may lay the foundation for a deeper inquiry in the future.

After identifying collections of artists’ books within driving distance of Chapel Hill, NC, I originally contacted each location by telephone. In several cases, I spoke directly with the individual I was interested in interviewing. In other cases, I spoke with reference staff who assisted me in locating the individual most appropriate for my questions. Only one location was contacted originally by email. In several instances, I
was not able to schedule an interview, due to schedule conflicts or lack of interest or willingness to participate. In all cases where individuals were interested in speaking with me, the details of my visits were finalized via email. I forwarded each individual with whom I would be speaking a list of open-ended questions I wanted to cover during the interview, so that they would have the opportunity to think about their responses before my arrival.4

I decided to use the long semi-structured interview technique, as discussed in *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (Robson 270, 278). I felt this format would allow me to conduct conversations with my subjects that did not feel stiffened by a formal question-answer structure. Rather, information could flow between us, while pre-written questions served as a guide for topics to discuss during those conversations. Each interview varied in scope and detail, but I was able to gather answers from each individual to the questions I had created as a guide. In this way, I was able to compare each individual’s responses, as well as gather additional information that helped to further my understanding of artists’ book collections. I learned early in my research that long, semi-structured interviews are more difficult on the telephone because the “lack of visual cues may cause problems in interpretation” (Robson 282). Thus, I decided that all interviews would be conducted face-to-face. During my visit to each location, I would also have the opportunity to see how and where each collection was housed. As the interviewer, I was uncomfortable introducing a tape recorder. I did not want that discomfort to affect my subjects or ruin the rapport between us, so I decided that taking extensive notes during the interviews would be sufficient for this study. Most importantly, I did not want my discomfort to distract me from the

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4 See Appendix C for list of questions forwarded to each individual.
active-listening skills that are so important in the interviewing process (Seidman 64). Because I was not seeking detailed information, but rather a general sense of the issues and problems associated with artists’ books, I was comfortable eliminating a tape recorder.

During the interviews, all individuals appeared to be interested in the topic and willing to help with my research. They often suggested additional sources for me to read or look at, and all were interested in reading the results of my study. They tended to agree on most issues, although opinion varied at times. Our conversations unearthed many issues and concerns regarding collections of artists’ books in libraries.
Results & Observations

The results of this study reveal that although collections range in size, scope, and purpose, there are many similar issues and common perceptions regarding artists’ books in libraries. Using the aliases described in the Methodology section of this paper, I have synthesized their responses in the following six categories: defining the term “artists’ books,” reasons for collecting artists’ books, information-seeking behaviors related to artists’ books, how artists’ books are treated differently than other material in the collection, opinions regarding standards and guidelines, and the future needs of artists’ book collections.

Agreeing to Disagree: Defining Artists’ Books

During each of the interviews, I began by asking if the subject had a definition for the term “artists’ books.” Knowing this was a source of debate in the literature, I was interested in finding out what professionals thought. I was surprised to learn that none of the collections have a formal definition that guides collection practices. Rather, each individual defers to his or her own ideas for the term when building the collection, all of which were very broad.

Claudia, for example, does not feel the term should ever be defined. As she says, “artists’ books are as wonderful as they are because they have freedom from definition.” For her, the broader the definition is, the better (e.g. “book created by an artist”). Also seeking a broad definition, Susie, who is herself an artist, thinks of artists’ books as just
another form of art. Because they are similar in format to books, as many of them use the traditional codex format, she feels the library is an appropriate home for them. Jaime originally said, “you can’t define book art until you define art.” Though he then added that the definition he liked best is that “an artists’ book combines content and context into one idea and the presentation contributes to what the reader will understand of the book.”

From a more pragmatic standpoint, Pam said she usually defaults to the Library of Congress’s definition of artists’ books in the subject authority file: “books that are produced by artists and intended as visual art objects.” But she adds her own comment that artists’ books “somehow enlarge the idea/notion of writing.” Mary also agrees on this notion of ‘enlarging the idea’ and says the “artist uses the book form as personal statement either to comment about what book is or use the book form to express their statement.” She referred to Duchamp’s now-familiar concept of art: if an artist says it’s an artists’ book, then it’s an artist’s book.

None of the definitions offered by the subjects are really at conflict with each other, though they do range slightly in scope. They are also consistent with the definitions outlined in the literature. Several of the individuals were uncomfortable defining artists’ books at all, while others had a definition prepared for me when I arrived for the interview. After discussing just what exactly artists’ books are, the discussions often moved to why they are in the library collection in the first place.

**Why Collect Artists’ Books?**

Four of the individuals I spoke with collect artists’ books to directly support the curriculum. They all work at colleges or universities with strong art programs. They
support courses in artists’ books, printmaking, photography, and at Mary’s institution, occasional continuing education courses. Pam feels that regardless of the specific curriculum, artists’ books are part of any well-rounded art library. She notes that more and more libraries are beginning to collect artists’ books, even if they don’t have a particular faculty member who teaches an artists’ book course. They are still relevant to teaching other media.

Pam, Mary, Jaime and Susie all agree that their collections are used primarily by teachers and students, but they are also made available to local artists and occasional visiting scholars. Mary appeared to be the most conscious of wear and damage to the artists’ books and limits the number of individuals who are allowed access to them. Though she occasionally allows others to use the collection, she tries to preserve them for the students at her own institution.

Susie noted that she tries to support local artists by purchasing their work and has a contract with a local artists’ book group from whom she purchases most of the books they create. Susie also makes an effort to buy student work each year so that future students can learn from it – she feels it adds both depth and variety to the collection. Jaime agrees with this practice, adding that it’s a nice way to include alumni work in the collection.

In all cases, reference works about artists’ books are housed both within the collection and in the circulating stacks as well. In addition, Mary noted that she often includes commercial items of interest for their structure, like pop-up books, which students often use when experimenting with various book structures. Susie, Jaime, Pam and Mary all agree that they are aiming for as much variety in their collection as possible, to provide
students with a wide range of artists’ books from which to learn. All four consciously aim to fill in what they see as holes in their collection when they make purchase decisions.

Only Claudia works with a collection that is not used for browsing or as a teaching collection. In order to preserve and protect their artists’ books, they are selective in allowing only serious scholars access to the collection. However, they share their collection with the public through annual exhibits, which they have organized for 15 years and include borrowed items from other collections in the exhibits as well. They have exhibited over 700 books in the last 15 years and Claudia noted that people come from all over the world to see them. I attribute this variance in collection practice to the fact that Claudia works at a museum library, while the other four individuals in my study work at academic libraries. Thus, rather than focus on building a teaching collection, she collects for the future and for exhibits and approaches artists’ books more like art objects than traditional library materials.

**Information-Seeking Behaviors**

There was less consistency among the subjects in my study in terms of information-seeking behavior than I had originally thought there would be. There seemed to be limited, if any, communication among professionals. In addition to investigating individual artists through websites or direct mailings, several individuals mentioned reading the *Journal of Artists’ Books*. Although they all had written policies for other materials in their library, none of them had written policies or set procedures for seeking
information about artists’ books. Rather, it seemed to be done on an ad hoc basis, while relying on their own subject specialization and knowledge to guide them.

Of the five individuals in my study, Claudia has the least communication with other library professionals. She says she never talks to other curators or librarians because she does not want to be influenced by their purchases. Rather, she does most of her communication directly with the artists themselves and trusts her own curatorial abilities to select the artists’ books that are right for her collection. She does, however, read and contribute to the current literature. So in a way, she is communicating with her profession through the literature, but only in terms of understanding and thinking about artists’ books. When it comes time to make purchases, she trusts her own expertise over any other. Her collection practices have become more like a curator’s than a librarian’s.

The four individuals who work with teaching collections sometimes purchase titles recommended by faculty members. However, they all agreed that faculty members have less input in collection building than one would think. Rather, the librarians seem to make all the decisions about the collection and thus far, faculty needs have been satisfied by the collections built by the individuals in this study. Susie, Jaime, Pam and Mary all receive information directly from artists, through mailings or direct contact. They also all have dealers or presses that they purchase through frequently. Like Claudia, for the most part they do not spend a lot of time talking with other library professionals about what titles they should add to the collection. Susie says she sometimes browses websites to see what other collections are purchasing, but for the most part purchases items with her own selection skills.
Although communication between the professionals I spoke with is limited, networking does play a part in the information seeking behavior of several of my subjects. Because of her interest in seeking out more information about artists’ books, Pam recently participated in a course taught by Joanna Drucker at the Rare Book School in Virginia, along with about a dozen other professionals ranging from academic and public librarians to book dealers. Drucker is one of the preeminent scholars on artists’ books and provided her students with a bibliography for the course, to which Pam often refers. She and Mary also mentioned participating in the Art Libraries Society listserv, ARLIS-L. Mary seems to be very involved with ARLIS and says she gets a lot of information about artists’ books from exhibits at the annual conference, as well as from occasional conversations with a few art librarians who are also interested in artists’ books. According to Mary, they have discussed working on collaborative artists’ book projects in the future.

**How are Artists’ Books Treated in Comparison with Other Items in the Library?**

During each of my interviews, I had the opportunity to see where and how the artists’ book collections were housed. There were some similarities, but for the most part, each institution had developed a system that suited its local needs. Although access to the collection varied at each institution, all collections were non-circulating. They were all happy with their systems and seemed not to know a lot about how other collections housed artists’ books.

Susie and Jaime come from special collections and archive backgrounds and their collections reflect this. Each artist’s book in their collections is given a unique number
rather than Library of Congress classification. The first part of these numbers is based on a size system: 1 is used for small books which are housed in archival folders in archival boxes, 2 is used for the more traditional codex book form and are housed like ‘traditional’ books on the shelf, 3 is used for multi-structural works and these are sometimes housed in custom enclosures or boxes, and 4 is used for oversize and large format items. In addition to being assigned a number according to size, the second part of the number is essentially an acquisition number. These numbers are written inside the book with a pencil and are also included on an acid-free bookmark with a barcode. They maintain a database separate from the integrated library system where these items are held as a “collection.” This database is currently only available for staff use, but is planned to expand for public or even web use in the future. The artists’ books in Susie and Jaime’s collection are also available through the integrated library system and can be searched for by limiting the location code. Otherwise, it is a browsable collection within the special collection stacks.

Pam and Mary both come from a more traditional art librarian background and their collections are shelved by Library of Congress classification. Mary stores her collection in a locked rare book room, while Pam stores her collection behind the circulation desk, where it is made available to any readers interested in browsing. In order to avoid marking artists’ books, Pam had to develop an agreement with the acquisition department of her large academic library system. She has decided that all artists’ books are to be sent immediately to her rather than through the normal route of processing. After she has reviewed each book, a specific cataloger then catalogs them sends them to the appropriate department where marked protective enclosures are made for them. The artists’ books
themselves are not marked. Mary is also concerned with marking items and bookmarks her collection with acid-free slips that include barcodes and Library of Congress classification numbers. Unlike Pam, Mary does not require that each item be housed in protective enclosures. Rather, only some of them get protective enclosures, in particular a collection of miniature artists’ books. However, she limits the amount of browsing in the collection, and thus does not need to worry as much about damage as Pam does. When readers use the collection, Mary requires that they wear white gloves, which not only protect the artists’ books, but which she feels instills respect for the material.

At Claudia’s institution, each book is housed in an archival acid free box and is shelved alphabetically by artist. Of the 700 artists’ books in the collection, about 25% are cataloged with Library of Congress classification and are available in the integrated library system. The remaining 75% of the items in the collection have acquisition numbers rather than a Library of Congress classification number and are recorded in an inventory database. Regardless of numbers assigned to the item, they are always shelved alphabetically by artist. However, the institution is currently in a period of transition. The artists’ book collection has always been housed as a special collection in the rare book room of the library. However, Claudia’s institution has made a decision to separate the collection and house artists’ books that are more sculptural or unique in the museum’s art storage area, while the artists’ books that are more traditional codex form will remain in the library’s rare book room. The institution has a “Works of Art Committee” that has a formal voting process for each item to decide where it shall be housed. Thus, the collection that Claudia works with is moving more and more away from traditional
library practices, and more towards traditional museum practices. The artists’ books are treated more like art objects than books.

**Guidelines are Much Gentler than Standards**

All five of the individuals I interviewed were put off by the idea of national or regional standards to govern collections of artists’ books in libraries. However, they showed more interest in the idea of guidelines. They all agreed that they would certainly consult standards or guidelines, if a reputable source were to create or publish them, but that they would keep in mind the needs of their users before changing current collection practices.

Susie summarized everyone’s feelings when she said, “standardizing artists’ books would be like standardizing art” and she feels there are “too many exceptions in artists’ books to standardize them.” She added, “The items themselves aren’t standard.” Jaime is also against the idea of standards because he does not like the connotations associated with the concept. He feels like the word implies a need for enforcement. He prefers the more acceptable concept of guidelines, adding that guidelines are always helpful. Mary does not see need for standards or guidelines because “reasons for collecting artists’ books vary so much from library to library.” Her goal is to build a teaching collection that suits her school’s curriculum, but she says that others may have an entirely different curriculum or be collection for different reasons. “These differences don’t lend themselves well to standards,” she noted.

Even with this opposition to the idea of standards, each individual said he or she would be willing to look at standards or guidelines to see if they could help, though most
conceded that they like their current collection practices. Although she would be willing to look at standards, Susie noted that she likes the way her collection houses artists’ books by the physical nature because it saves space and makes items easier to find. She says it makes sense for their needs because students are often looking at artists’ books with specific structures, which can quickly be identified with their current shelving practices. Jaime also mentioned that he would be willing to change current practices only if they were good for his users. “The bottom line,” he says, “is the user.” Claudia does not see a need for guidelines, but admits that they are not necessarily a bad idea. She concedes that they may, in fact, be helpful. She says if there was contribution to the discussion by both librarians and artists or art scholars, for example the Art Libraries Society (ARLIS) and the College Art Association (CAA), they may arrive at some good conclusions. Because artists’ books are both art objects and books, this communication between fields, Claudia says, is crucial for artists and librarians to understand one another.

Pam was the only person I spoke to who mentioned an interest in developing a clearly written collection policy, part of her reason she to attend the seminar at the Rare Book School. She does not like the idea of national standards imposed on her collection. Rather, she thinks guidelines should be created at the local level first because there are always unique local needs and local funds. She feels it would be a good workshop for local consortia, such as the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN) or a state university system to tackle. She says local libraries should see what’s available in the area, assess their collections, and then go from there. Because artists’ books are often expensive, she thinks collections should be careful not to duplicate one another with
duplicate approval plans. She also added that it would be hard for one library to dictate to all. If standards or guidelines were created, she would look closely at them and depending upon the caliber and reputation of the individuals creating the standards, would carefully read and consider them. If experts in the field wrote them, she said she would most likely defer to them. She also noted that standards would be helpful for new people or libraries with no written policies. They could serve as a good starting point. Her concern with national standards, however, is that they may not address local issues and concerns.

**The Artists’ Books Wish List**

All five of the individuals I spoke with have ideas and projects they would like to see accomplished in the near future. Aside from increased funding, a common thread among all their ideas was improving visibility of the collection. Whether by creating additional access through more robust databases or increased exhibiting efforts, all five of my subjects expressed a concern with improving public relations relating to their collections.

In terms of more robust databases and greater access to the collection, Susie, Claudia, Mary, and Jamie all mentioned that they would like to create or improve current systems. Claudia is planning for her library to adopt a database within the next three years that will be web accessible for greater access to the collection. She would love to her library adopt a tool like Multi-Mimsi, a collection management system used in many museums to allow greater precision in describing physical aspects of art than the MARC21 format. She would also like to see images of artists’ books incorporated into this database. Susie and Mary would also like to see images and more physical or type descriptors added to
their collection databases in order to make searching for items easier. Mary noted that she would like to perhaps do this with other members of the Art Libraries Society (ARLIS) or with her local consortia as a shared project. She thinks this would be a great grant project and help provide more access to the collection online.

Another way to improve visibility of artists’ book collections is through continued exhibition efforts. Currently, only Claudia’s collection has maximized the potential of exhibiting artists’ books. Susie noted her interest in improving her current website and adding more online exhibits and images of the collection. She hopes that this would advertise the collection to other schools, so that they may also use the collection. Pam feels the biggest weakness with her collection is the lack of exhibit space available to her. She feels exhibits would bring more readers into the library and create a greater awareness of the collection. Several of the subjects also mentioned their interest in loaning works from their collection for exhibits at other locations.
Conclusion & Recommendations for the Future

Collections of artists’ books will continue to grow in libraries. There is no sign of artists slowing down their creative efforts. Librarians need to be prepared for more experimental artists’ books, such as virtual artists’ books. Although none of the subjects in this study are currently collecting virtual artists’ books, will they do so in the future? Will there be a new format adopted by book artists? Will librarians be prepared for increased change? With relatively small collections of artists’ books, it seems to have been easy in the past to deal with each artist’s book on a case-by-case basis at the local level, but as the volume of artists’ books in libraries increases, librarians need to consider updating or changing their practices, as well as the usefulness of standards or guidelines. Although the subjects in this study were opposed to standards regulating their collections, they did mention several issues that could use improvement.

Although standards are not appropriate for artists’ books collection development and approval plans, they may be appropriate for cataloging, preservation, and access issues. Because the MARC21 format is not robust enough to accurately describe the physicality of artists’ books, there should be an increased effort in exploring cataloging options. With the growth of technology, there are many alternatives that can be explored to provide better access to artists’ books. Likewise, there is increasingly more information about preservation and conservation methods. Librarians will need to confer with art conservators for appropriate housing and storage methods. If artists’ books are to be a mainstay in libraries, then we need to adapt our storage facilities and preservation
knowledge appropriately. Additionally, the issue of access and security is another area that may lend itself to standardization. Because artists’ books are often more fragile, unique, and expensive than traditional books, access to them may need to be limited, and security may need to be increased. All of these issues will do well as the focus of continued research and communication, with the end goal of standards to which librarians can refer when making decisions.

None of these changes can be made unless there is increased communication. This can be achieved through a variety of methods, including the creation of a listserv or working group dedicated solely to artists’ books, an increase in scholarly publications in the library science literature, and improved programs of collection exhibitions and public relations efforts. All of this work may be most successful with an increase in library and museum collaboration, including consortia, regional, and national partnerships. Collaboration increases access to resources, and in itself is a robust form of communication. Above all else, this communication must include art scholars, artists, and librarians. An increase in communication can help build the debate surrounding artists’ books, and can serve as a medium for sharing ideas, problems and solutions. Once we embrace this increased effort for communication, we may then consider the commonalities and differences between collections and consider once again the need for standardization.
Appendix A. Examples of Artists’ Books

**Fig. 1 - Beatrice Coron’s *New York City Bestiary*, 1997**

one of a kind artist book with 12 papercut tableaux and titles with accordion binding

The accordion binding is a popular structure among book artists.
Fig. 2 – Roberta Lavadour’s *Matter*, n.d.

one of a kind mixed media sculptural artists’ book made from handmade cloth covered box with inset glass covering for found objects: including walnut husk, dogbane, tall oat grass, and deer bone.

This is a good example of an artists’ book made with organic materials that may pose preservation and conservation problems.
Figs. 3,4 – Miriam Schaer’s *Baby Love, 1995*

one of a kind sculptural artists’ book made from toddler dress, acrylic, ink, xerox, plastic doll, 12 x 15 x 12.

This is a good example of a sculptural artists’ book that may cause storage problems. Librarians would need to build a box or protective enclosure for permanent storage.
Figs. 5, 6 - Peggy Gotthold and Lawrence G. Van Velzer’s *The Man in Asbestos*, n.d. edition of 150 copies, each 48 pages, 6 5/8 x 9 inches oblong and is printed letterpress on Mohawk Superfine paper on a Hacker Hand Press. The type is Monotype San Serif and they are hand bound in Japanese cloth over boards.

This is a good example of an artists’ book that at first appears to be a “normal” book. However, with further investigation, it reveals itself as an artists’ book. The text is a futurist story written by humorist Stephen B. Leacock, and is illustrated by photo-engravings of drawings by 16th century artist Jan Vredeman and 20th artist, Peggy Gotthold. It is a hand bound limited edition, intended as a work of art.
Figs. 7, 8 – Roberta Lavadour’s *By Day II*, n.d.
one of a kind artists’ book made fromhandmade paper slides that fit into a handmade viewer.

This is a good example of an artists’ book that requires interaction with the reader. The artist is interested in highlighting the intricacies of handmade paper, and only through using the handmade viewer can the reader understand her message. This type of artists’ book can cause access and preservation problems, since it is meant to be used, but is made of delicate material that may easily be damaged with use. Librarians must take into consideration both the artist’s intention and the preservation of the item.
This artists’ book, as do all the examples in this appendix, highlights the interest in *enlarging the notion of reading* that is common among many book artists. Lavadour describes this work as follows: “The song of the red-winged blackbirds, which return here each spring, is a great vehicle for exploring the difference between reading about something and the type of knowing that comes from experience.”
Appendix B. Consent Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
AT
CHAPEL HILL

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are being asked to participate in a study that will examine current practices and professional sentiment regarding standards for the collection of artists’ books in libraries. You have been identified as an individual whose work in a research library directly relates to artists’ books. With the relative youth of artists’ books in library collections and the unique characteristics of each artists’ book, I am interested in how you currently make decisions regarding your collection as well as your professional opinion regarding national standards or guidelines for collections of artists’ books in libraries. This study will be used as part of my master’s paper to complete my M.L.S. from the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

I am requesting approximately one hour of your time to introduce me to your collection and respond to questions about your practices and opinions, as outlined above. All efforts will be made to make the interview convenient for your schedule. I feel that interviews will allow me to fully explore this issue and your decision to help me is greatly appreciated. Approximately 4-6 individuals will be interviewed for the study.

Your participation is completely voluntary. All information you provide will remain strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study or its results. You may refuse to answer any question(s) you choose. You may withdraw your responses at any point during this study. You may also indicate if you wish to receive a summary of my findings when the study is completed.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me, Cristianne Fellowes, at 919-967-5823 or mckec@email.unc.edu, or my faculty advisor, David Carr, Ph.D., at 919-962-8364 or carr@ils.unc.edu.

The Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board (AA-IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has approved this study. If you have any questions about your
rights as a research participant in this study, please contact the AA-IRB at 919-962-7761 or at aa-irb@unc.edu.

Sincerely,

Cristianne Fellowes
School of Information and Library Science
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

__________________________________________________________________________

I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study, and they have been answered for me. I have read the information in this consent form, and I agree to be in the study. There are two copies of this form. I will keep one copy and return the other to the investigator.

_____________________________   ________________________
Signature of Participant     Date
Appendix C. Interview Questions

Practice Questions:
1. How do you define artists’ books?
2. Why do you collect artists’ books?
   - How do you make purchase/gift selections?
   - Who are your readers? (artists, scholars, curators, general public, other?)
3. How are artists’ books treated differently from other materials in your collection?
4. How are artists’ books treated the same as other materials in your collection?
5. Where do you seek information when making decisions regarding artists’ books?
   - Colleagues (librarians, curators, other)? Literature? Other?
6. Do you have defined standards or guidelines for collecting/handling artists’ books at the local level?
   - How were these guidelines created?

Theory Questions:
1. Do you see a need for standards or guidelines for the collection of artists’ books in libraries?
   - If yes, should it be on a regional, national, or international level?
2. Whom do you feel should be in charge of such standards?
   - What group or organization or individual do you see as suitable for such a job?
   - Or should it be a shared responsibility?
3. Would you (or your library administration) be willing to give up local collection guidelines in favor of broader standards?
4. What would be the benefit of standardizing the collection of artists’ books?
5. What would be the negatives of standardizing the collection of artists’ books?
Sources Consulted


