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On Libraries: Introduction

Misha Myers & Deirdre Heddon

Context

On Libraries responds to the performative and performance potential of libraries as sites and services; and, to the shifting function, form and content of libraries within society. Ongoing vociferous public responses to the threatened -- and actioned -- closures of public libraries across England demonstrate the continued social and cultural value placed on libraries, in spite of unprecedented access to information enabled by technology (from e-books, to e-newspapers, to Wikipedia). Furthermore, there has been a proliferation of artist projects that range from engaging with libraries as performances to libraries as sites and materials for performances. The contributions to the issue offer an international representation of this activity both in the form of artist's pages and extended essays reflecting on these projects. Given this context, this is a timely moment to document and question the significance of the relationship between libraries and performance.

Whilst On Libraries is international in scope, as issue editors we want to make transparent at the outset the geographical and cultural contexts from which we come to the matter and practices of libraries and to the various performances attached to them. Offering brief summaries of and perspectives on the current situation of publically funded libraries in our 'home' countries -- Australia and the UK/Scotland respectively -- also makes evident the diversity of national priorities and practices in spite of globalisation.

In his Jean Whyte memorial lecture 2016 for Monash University in Melbourne, Alex Byrne, former State Librarian and Chief Executive from the State Library of New South Wales, indicated that Australian libraries are prospering, in a 'golden age', despite restrictions on funding of public services at all levels of government. The reasons Byrne gave for this are in some respects due to the specificities of the Australian context. Taking an international approach, the state library system in Australia was founded by drawing on the best of North American, British and other nation's practices. The necessity of developing inter-library loan and distance education systems to respond to the needs of remote isolated communities across Australia has led to exemplary adoption of technology and embeddedness of the library system in communities. According to Byrne, technology has allowed professional librarians to 'become people orientated, to put aside work that is no longer necessary' (Byrne 2016). While he acknowledged that the shrinking of routine manual work with the replacement by machines for tasks such as cataloguing, stocktaking, lending, etc. in libraries has resulted in declining staff numbers, a general trend repeated across many other industries with digitization, it has allowed for growth of non-routine manual work that requires new skills, such as children's activities and services for communities as well as managing the preservation and delivery of information.

In September 2015, the National Library of Australia (NLA) moved from the Attorney-General's portfolio to the Communications and the Arts portfolio (Stokes and Schwirtlich 2016). In the Director General's review for the National Library of Australia Annual Report 2015-2016, Anne-Marie Schwirtlich noted accessibility as a key priority for the NLA saying 'A collection that cannot be discovered, used and shared is one that cannot inspire, delight, illuminate and animate' (ibid). The programmes that served to support this priority have included the expansion of Trove, an innovative online platform that is a search engine, aggregation of metadata and repository of text digital resources relating to Australia, to include more culturally diverse

content including that reflecting Chinese heritage in Australia and Indigenous Australian culture and encouraging engagement from both communities. In addition, an exhibition and events programme has attracted visitors and generated income, in particular the landmark collaboration with the National Library of China, Celestial Empire, which contributed \$26 million to the Australian Capital Territory. Nevertheless, the overall operating outcome for the NLA in 2015-2016 resulted in a deficit of \$9,043 million (ibid).

At the time of writing, public library provision across the UK feels precarious. The 2015/16 Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) figures recorded a reduction in expenditure of 2.6% (£25 million) from the previous year whilst the number of local authority public libraries also reached a 10-year low at 3,850, continuing a long-standing trend of year-on-year closures. Whilst reduction of library services is most visible in England, the devolved nations have all experienced shrinking provision. One context for the reduction or withdrawal of library services across the UK is the climate of economic austerity. Another, ostensibly at least, is the radically changed ways by which information is distributed and accessed.

The public library is a space in which the interconnections between politics and policy are made explicit. Resisting popular opinion, Liz Chapman and Frank Webster propose that the greatest threat to libraries' continuation is not the 'Information Society' or the fact that digital technology has resulted in calls for libraries to 'modernise' if they are to survive (Chapman and Webster 2008: 642-?). The real threat, they suggest, comes from the wider context of neoliberalism, with its organising principles of people's ability to pay, private sector over public sector provision, commodification (price valuations) and profitability as arbiter of availability (ibid: 643). Such principles make 'traditional library practices suspect and hard to sustain' (ibid: 645) as

'informational resources and activities once provided from the public purse [...] are increasingly incorporated -- if unevenly -- into market operations' (ibid.).

The increasingly entrepreneurial expectations placed on libraries across the UK and the incorporation of market relations into their services is evidenced in two strategic documents published recently in England and Scotland. That these reports have been commissioned at a time when library provision is so threatened is not incidental. Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021 presents a number of national recommendations, from 'Encouraging common design principles' to 'Funding library services in varied and sustainable ways'. Whilst the report stresses that libraries 'should be integral to all public services' strategies' it also insists that they must 'demonstrate their value to service commissioners -- promoting themselves as an asset not a cost' (ibid.). Outcomes to be delivered through the implementation of the strategy include cultural and creative enrichment, greater prosperity, and stronger, more resilient communities (ibid.). The document also proposes that libraries must rely less on local authority grants and diversify their funding by 'generating additional income streams' (8).

In 2015, the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) published Ambition and Opportunity: A Strategy for Public Libraries in Scotland 2015 - 2020. The national outcome statement of this marginally earlier publication shares priorities with the English report: libraries have a key role to play in supporting individuals and communities to fulfil their potential, adding to 'Scotland's social, economic and cultural wellbeing' (SLIC 2015: 3). As with the recommendations for England, this strategy recommends the embrace of 'an evidence-based and measurement-rich culture' (ibid.).

Anxiety about the impact of market forces and market valuations on libraries' futures -- not whether they exist but in what form they exist -- is marked in

many of the contributions to this edition. The role that performance plays in this increasingly marketized scenario is a pressing question: complicit, resistant, or somewhere in-between? In conceiving of a themed edition On Libraries, we were motivated to discover whether the focus on 'libraries in the arts' and on 'the arts in libraries' provides an impetus to discuss public services in terms of (1) their value and the threat they face in particular contexts or the different forms and services they are taking, (2) the extent to which performance sheds light on or questions the place/use of books and of libraries in the 21st Century, and (3) the forms of collaboration taking place between performance and library.

### **Performance and Libraries**

As is evidenced across the pages of this edition, a vast amount of theatre and performance takes place in libraries. This is not a twenty-first century phenomenon. The history of public libraries is one that coincides with the provision of leisure appropriate to the development of 'good citizenship' (Snape 2008). Public libraries have often provided access to other leisure pursuits. For example, the first new building funded under the UK's Public Library Act, which opened in Norwich in 1857, combined the library with a museum and art school (Pepper 2008: 586). Libraries often provided separate smoking rooms, games rooms, conversation rooms, reading rooms, newsrooms, magazine rooms (for women users) and lecture theatres. At least two significant theatres in England offer tangible reminders of the historic relationships forged between libraries and theatre. Sheffield's Library Theatre, built in 1934, was originally designed as a lecture hall for the city's Central Library and hosted private performances for non-paying audiences. The first performance staged there was the Sheffield Playgoers Society See Naples and Die, in November 1934. In 1947 the lecture hall was fitted with dressing rooms and improved stage lighting and was renamed the Library Theatre. The city of Manchester also hosts a Library Theatre. As in Sheffield, when

Manchester's Central Library opened in 1934 it was furnished with a large lecture hall. With seating for 300, it was an ideal venue for performances. Following the Second World War, the Libraries Committee of Manchester was empowered to utilize the theatre for a variety of uses including lectures, concerts and plays 'for or in connection with the advancement of art, education, drama, science, music or literature' (Lowry). The year after, the Theatre was let to a non-profit-making theatre company, Manchester Intimate Theatre Group, whose first performance there was The Seagull. Apparent in the provision of lecture/theatre spaces is that libraries often functioned, even in the 1940s, as cultural centres. Whilst key contemporary drivers to diversify library provision might be neoliberal in design and ambition, there is nothing new in libraries' delivery of a diverse range of activities.

Since 2015, Arts Council England, in its role as development agency for libraries in England, has made available a dedicated funding stream, 'Grants for the Arts Libraries Fund'. This has supported hundreds of arts-based library projects, many of which have included performances. Whilst the Arts Council England has no statutory responsibility for libraries, its interest in developing the relationships between theatres and libraries is also not new. For example, in 1942/3, its predecessor, the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts, funded a Shakespeare season in Leytonstone's library (Muddiman 2008: 85, 87). In part, then as now, the incorporation into libraries of performance and other arts practices was prompted by a desire to increase library use.

Current practices in Australia mirror the UK's cultural-extension activities. Melbourne's Athenaeum offers another historic example of a library, theatre and art gallery co-existing together. One of Victoria's oldest public institutions, the building was founded in 1839 as the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute, later renamed in 1846 as the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts, and then again the Athenaeum in 1872 as the subscription library became

and remained its focal point. The 880 seat proscenium arch theatre of present day hosts theatre, comedy and music performances, talks and presentations by the Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas, and it is the principal venue for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and Melbourne Opera. Libraries in Australia, both state and local public institutions like the Athenaeum Library, are redefining the function of the library by offering residency programmes, performances and exhibition opportunities within the library space. Companies like Barthlau's Barking Spider Visual Theatre, which has created site-specific performances with the library's space and collections as material subjects of performance, offer one example. Other initiatives are transforming the library space into a venue for performance, such as the City of Sydney council's Late Night Library programme launched in 2011 and Brisbane City Council Libraries' Fusion Fridays events aimed at diversifying the activities and accessibility of these spaces through the promotion of a range of 'out-of-hours' free public arts events within the library. Many of the artist's pages in this edition offer direct testimony of the ways in which relationships between libraries and performance, and performances in and for libraries, are becoming embedded in the library offer.

## Themes

In formulating our call for the present edition, we recognized four major themes which the resulting papers contribute to comprehensively: (1) the artistry of librarianship and the organisation of knowledge; (2) how libraries are performed or engaged within and through performance and performance research; (3) the changing materialities, affects and uses of library spaces, their collections and how they hold and distribute them and (4) the importance that access and mobility of knowledge have for the continued societal role of libraries. We draw out some of these themes below:

1. The art of librarianship, Knowledge & Dis-Play

Librarianship is as much an art as a science according to nineteenth-century librarian Louis Stanley Jast (Kelly 1977). On Libraries offers a platform for exploring the generative tension between science and play, or playing at science. Artist enterprises, such as The Bristol Art Library (1998- ) created by Annabel Other, the Artist in the Library project and associated symposium curated by Clare Qualmann expand and subvert the structures of library technologies -- rules, regulations, policies, by laws and practices. At the same time, the artists restate the nineteenth-century commitment to free access to knowledge enshrined in public libraries.

Through her articulation of the ways in which artists engage with, in, and on libraries Clare Qualmann outlines a library aesthetics -- the practices and languages of shared use and interaction, of order and chaos, of display, classification, cataloguing and organization -- which reveals the interests and possibilities that libraries and performance may hold in and for one another.

## 2. Performing (in) the Library

Whilst the library as public institution is a firmly modern invention, the availability of 'information' today alongside the wider neoliberal context, places its function and form under scrutiny -- and potential threat. What is a library for in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? As libraries become (re)embedded within the wider notion of community centres -- sitting alongside the sports facilities, the café, and the theatre -- how are its books encouraged to spill beyond their pages? How does performance serve to engage with and enliven the library as a public space of and for learning? How might these activities be valued as good in themselves? How do the interrelated activities of performance and of research manifest within libraries of performance and performances of libraries? The collaborative contribution from Lois Keidan (Live Art Development Agency) includes three case studies by Marco Pustianaz, Mary Paterson and Tara Fatehi Irani that reflect on how the LADA Study Room, a publicly-accessible

Live Art library responds to or impacts on performance through the archiving and documentation of performance. Joseph Dunne and Anna Makrzanowska counter Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor's positioning of library systems as 'methods of entombment' through an exploration of his legacy and archive Cricoteka (Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor) that demonstrates an enlivening and transmitting of performance legacies through the social dynamics of both libraries and performance. Through his account of the fire that destroyed The Mackintosh Library of Glasgow School of Art, Ross Birrell describes the paradoxical space of the library, as both a place of gathering (in terms of the assemblage of information, archives and material evidence of the past) and clearing (in offering escape and a place of reflection). Like artists' studios, Birrell suggests this library and what remained in the fire's aftermath offered a particular synarchy of contemporary artistic research through the dynamic and creative friction offered by this paradox.

Marco Pustianaz (LADA) considers the relationship between the documentation of performance and the library, as in what eludes and resists print, and between the researcher as performer in the library in the choreography of the searching and browsing of the library collection. Lucy Cash and Sheila Ghelani conceive the users of the library as parts of its body and in their installation Some Patterns of Current (2014) they imagined the users of Hampton Library along with the objects and people of its past all as a book; a book that moves. Hester Reeves' artist pages follow a similar vein finding correspondence between bodies and the book in the documentation of her site-specific work Body I am and 'book' is just another word for the body (2015).

Ross Birrell, Mary Paterson (LADA) and Mischa Twitchin's contributions address the ways in which libraries manifest another tension through the unique forms of public solitude and contemplation, of both interiority and

exteriority simultaneously, that they accommodate. They provide spaces for sociality and collectivity through individual acts of reading and self-learning. Twitchin draws an analogy between libraries and cemeteries in what might be a eulogy for the disappearance of spaces for private contemplation, or for care of self and humanity, that comes with the removals, closures and ruins that are recounted throughout many of the contributions of the edition.

Tim Etchells and Ant Hampton's conversation on their performance The Quiet Volume (2010- ) reflects on how the whispered conversation of the performed dialogic readings of their performance held the tensions of quietude and contemplation, of interior and exteriority of these spaces and the books held within them within the restrained vocal chords. In doing so, they reveal both an embodiment of books and the acoustic phenomenon of libraries through their performance, which relates to the next issue to emerge in the edition, the materiality of libraries.

### 3. Library Materialities

The edition is haunted by books and libraries undergoing transformation, deconstruction, reconstruction, removal, displacement, dismantlement, closure, and ruin. While there is an anxiousness expressed amongst the pages of the volume about the changes that have resulted from the digitisation of books and the threat this may hold for the printed form or physical spaces of libraries, the diverse contributions celebrate and point towards the significance that books and libraries hold in everyday lives, the everyday behaviours, actions and engagements with them that are valued and important to hold onto. Innovative possibilities emerge as their form, function and content are re-designed and transformed. The library itself also appears in many of the contributions as a site for ethnographic study, a space for the contemplation of the library as an inhabited site, observing closely who gathers and what takes place there. As Mary Paterson emphasizes, life

happens in the library, and other contributors draw similar attention to the library as site of personal and social transformation. The sociability of libraries and the sociality of books are writ large across the pages of this themed edition, not least in our own essay on The Walking Library.

The interest in digital books began in 2006 with the release of Sony Readers and the Amazon Kindle a year later prompting libraries to offer e-books to borrow. In their study on how e-book borrowing has changed American book-borrowing and reading habits, librarian roles and library holdings, Zichur et al. (2012) found that there has been an increased demand for e-books and in volume of reading and diversification of genres. The role of librarians has changed to include provisions of technical support. However, along with the enthusiasm for e-books, respondents in the study expressed the importance of books in print and of library spaces to human sociality and self-edification. The significance of libraries as meeting places and the sharing of books were mentioned as important. Responses also reflected on the way that the materiality of books provides a certain confirmation of humanity or the comfort of human company, as expressed in the following response:

The biggest drawback of e-books for me is that I miss the feel and smell of the paper. I even miss the little signs of previous readers -- margin notes, cookie crumbs, forgotten bookmarks, etc. E-books are always very 'sterile.' I also very much dislike the fact that, unlike paper books, the e-book publishers can (and do) limit the number of times, or even completely prevent me from sharing the e-books I purchase.  
(Zicher et al 2012: 72)

This sentiment is echoed by Chip Kidd in his discussion of the art of designing books, when he proposed that there is a danger of losing 'the comfort of thingy-ness, a little bit of humanity' with e-books (Kidd). How do the personal

and kinaesthetic sources of knowledge transmitted through books -- the marginalia, hand-written inscriptions and deposited secrets (dried flowers, notes on torn pieces of paper) -- disappear and/or reappear in new digital forms? As the digitized book replaces printed versions, what will become of the book? How will those comforting aspects of books' materiality and their distribution be considered in the design of new forms of both?

Some contributions in the edition remind us of the value of books, how printed forms have enacted forms of human interaction and exchange. The Walking Library is offered as an ephemeral form of social architecture, with books positioned and acknowledged as the materials of social bonding. Jessa Mockridge's artist's page in the edition comprehensively traces her own engagement with one of the manifestations of books' relationality -- marginalia in the printed book -- through the labours she enacts in her role as a Library Assistant rubbing out the pencilled annotations left in library books. Ellen Bell's reflection on her work Billet Doux (2013) considers how the library book operates as objects of communication beyond the printed text of the book itself. Taking inspiration from the intimacy implicit in the materiality of books held in a public collection -- that they have been held by other people, that they hold memories -- she hides anonymous love letters in library books, transforming the pages of books into love nests awaiting a suitor.

Gabriella Daris' historical account of the 'disembodiment' of the library of the nineteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot with its relocation and eventual digitisation and subsequent re-embodiment through the author's own performance raises questions that point to the significance of not just the books or the building, but the boiserie of the library. The carved decorative woodwork and glasswork that housed the books functioned not as objects but as types of dwelling. Mette Edvarsen's performance Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine (2010- ) transforms a library collection into 'living

books' through the performer's 'becoming' a book through memorisation and oral interpretation. Through her reflections on the performance she considers the political significance of reading and performance, of learning by rote versus acquisitions of knowledge via technology, of the ephemerality of texts and memory as the selection process for digitisation overlooks and disappears books. Diana Damian's contribution enacts this erasure through the strikethrough of text, the discarded thought, and associate that negation with the disappearance of books and the libraries that hold them as 'thought under threat'. Chris Fremantle's artist's pages condense in a short space complex ideas relating to the utilitarian expectations of librarians, and of knowledge and learning more generally. He uses the books of his eco-arts library to create a 'bing', the Scottish word for a heap of metallic ore waste, a residue of mining. Fremantle's work cites the influential artist John Latham, who viewed 'bings' as valuable 'monuments to our own time' and 'unconscious process sculptures', rather than simply heaps of waste. Latham notably engaged with the function of libraries as storehouses of knowledge through his infamous Skoob Towers (1966) (towers of burning books) and Still and Chew (1966-7), an art work made with his students at Central St. Martin's School of Art. Together, they chewed and then distilled in glass vials Clement Greenberg's book Art and Culture (1961), 'borrowed' from the School's library.

#### 4. Mobilising Information

Several contributions in the edition reveal the ways that performance in and of libraries has challenged and transformed the barriers that exist for some individuals and communities to access the content, services and spaces libraries offer, thereby supporting their fundamental purpose and impetus towards self-education. These contributions both reveal the value libraries have as public services, but also suggest ways of ensuring those services

continue to reach, include and hold relevance for a diverse population of users.

Myron M. Beasley's contribution offers a historical contextualisation on the exclusionary politics of public libraries and the role of libraries in African American communities in the USA and how libraries in this context perform subversions of these politics to transform them into places of emancipation, rest, refuge and restoration for these communities. Beasley's essay reminds us, importantly, that the library as refuge is not a universal given; a symbol of democracy, it has functioned as a site of dehumanization, dispossession and violence and sits in-between precarious and emancipatory states. The library is thus a deeply political space. These issues of access and exclusion of spaces of knowledge and learning are scrutinized from a different historical, cultural and geographical context in Marco Valleriani's reading of Dario Fo's play, The Worker Knows 300 Words, the Boss Knows 1000, That's Why He's the Boss (1969). The play stages the dismantling of a library by a group of proletarian workers in a community space to give way to and be replaced by a billiard table. Valleriani considers the central role the library performs in the play, enacting emancipation through knowledge and provoking the cultural debate on the value of forms of entertainment and education at the core of Fo's play. To our surprise, this was one of the very few essays we received which sought to explore the representation of library spaces in theatre.

Ju Row Farr's reflection on Blast Theory's recent work, A Place Free of Judgement (2016) -- a 'teenager takeover' of libraries in the UK's West Midlands -- reveals how issues of mobility create particular barriers and challenges for some groups, such as young people, but at the same time speaks to the significant place libraries have in society for young people as spaces of freedom, imagination, expression and access to ideas and worlds. Iain Morrison, Liz Clarke and Penelope Barthlau address accessibility and the

changing function of libraries through subversions of their associated conventions and rules of behaviour through performances of noise-making, page-ripping, book burning, drag and dance in these spaces. As Morrison suggests, though, libraries' continuing shape-shifting, prompted in part by current threats to survival as well as more general cultural shifts responding to issues of inclusion and diversity, positions such performances less as tactical subversions than welcome collaborations. Writing from the opposite end of this spectrum perhaps, Jo Norcup explores the troubling erosion of libraries as necessary and valuable civic and community spaces for learning. Reviewing the enabling and transformative activity of collective reading offered by the library book club through an account of a reading group organized for pre-school parents in particular, she worries about the impact of cuts to such vital services. Apparent in Norcup's essay, and picked up by others including Beasley, is the importance of libraries -- and reading -- to the formation of subjectivity. The personal reflections on libraries offered by many of our contributors positions the library as a deeply autobiographical space.

Annabel Other, Laura Mansfield's and our own contribution to the edition reflect a range of approaches to the mobility of libraries grounded in both mobile library traditions and contemporary performance. Mansfield offers a portrait of Heather and Ivan Morison's work Tales of Time and Space (2008), which comprised the transformation of a Green Goddess fire engine into a library of apocalyptic fiction. She reflects on how this library in particular offers escape not just imaginative with the composition of its collection, but also overcoming isolation or deprivation through the mode of distribution itself. Other's Dewey classified images documenting her project The Bristol Art Library encapsulate the materiality of her mobile library and performed actions of the mobile librarian on foot distributing her artist-designed collection of books custom-fit and made for travel. Through our account of the journeys of The Walking Library we consider the historical mobility of books and libraries

and histories of reading to consider what a walking library is and does and what the inter-dependencies of walking, reading and place might offer in a context in which new behaviours and practices of engagement with and distribution of books change.

Altogether the contributions of the volume might provide some understanding of what performance and libraries offer one another and what impact their interaction may have together to advance new ways of perceiving, understanding, supporting, disrupting, subverting, reorganising and reconstructing spaces and activities of shared and self-learning. Developing new understanding is crucial at a time when libraries are undergoing a transformation in their function and services, modes of distribution and engagement, and forms and content of their collections.

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