THE SITUATIONAL LIBRARY

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Abstract

This paper introduces the ongoing series of itinerant participatory artworks called the Situational Library. Through the construction of a publicly accessible and open-source archive of physical and digital books, the Situational Library attempts to create a heightened sense of the exchange of something other, or external, which accompanies the exchange of the book itself.

Keywords: book, library, situational, electronic book, archive, participatory art

"*The Idea of the book is the Idea that there is no end to this very Idea, and that it contains nothing less than its own proliferation, its multiplication, its dispersion, and always, at some moment and in some respect or another, there is the silent or eloquent advice from the book that is an invitation to throw it away, to abandon it.*"
  – Jean-Luc Nancy

The quote is from Jean-Luc Nancy's *Sur le commerce des pensees : Du livre et de la librairie* and was appended to the texts associated with my first Situational Libraries in 2012 [1]. The Situational Library project is an ongoing and itinerant

order to address general notions of the book and the archive in light of the radically transformative forces currently affecting the complex pathways of the book's ideation, production and distribution.

With this paper I will introduce some of the basic concepts underlying the Situational Library, which I present as a model for a self-organizing, self-running archive with the potential to create a heightened awareness of a shared place and space through which there may be an exchange of energies, along with the exchange of the book itself, material or otherwise. Another underlying motivation in writing this paper is to permit other interested parties to build upon and develop their own Situational Libraries. For those who read with this purpose in mind, I include detailed plans, images and code at the main website hosting the project, where a version of this text will also be made available [2].

Before we discuss the Situational Library itself, a note on what I am talking about when I talk about a 'participatory artwork.' I refer to Claire Bishop's excellent critical volume *Artificial Hells* in which she distinguishes participatory art as connoting the involvement of many people and which she opposes to 'interactive art' which traditionally involves a one-on-one relationship [3]. I would add that, further to involving and encouraging the activity of any number of participants, my Situational

archive, or conversely no single participant, including myself, has any more or differing powers to change the state of the archive. Anyone connecting to the network may upload, download and delete files or categories, rename them, or whatever else is required to shape the archive. Once the work is set into motion it must, more or less, find its own final state without my intervention.

Finally, a note on the project's title, which borrows from the Situationist International (SI) movement founded in 1957 which lasted 15 years. The use of the term "Situational" in the project's title is intended to evoke some of the same primary concerns as addressed by the SI, specifically acknowledging the need to counteract the alienating effects of the "spectacle" produced by late-capitalist society through the conscious construction of "situations" for the purpose of heightening and uncovering authentic feelings and relationships. Guy Debord's *La Société du spectacle* ('The Society of the Spectacle'), published without copyright in 1967, is always among the first books I share in the Situational Library [4].

The Situational Library 1.0

In its most elementary form, The Situational Library is a free exchange of books in a publicly accessible space and place. The first iteration of the Situational Library "Swap, Drop and Roll," occurred at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), over two months beginning November, 2012. In this inaugural event several thousand de-accessioned books, donated by the State Library of Western Australia, were placed on and around a wooden platform in the center of one of the main rooms of the Institute. Alongside these an improvised table was placed, and secured to this table were some custom made rubber-stamps which the public were encouraged to use on the books in the room. The stamps read "This book belongs to the Situational Library", along with the project's symbol and a web address.

This Situational Library attracted many visitors, often through repeat visits, some donating their own unwanted books to the archive. The front of house and technical staff of the Institute were requested to allow the public to perform any and all activities within the Institute's standard legal and safety parameters. Activities that were encouraged included the reorganizing and sorting of the piles of books, archiving (such as stamping the books), and of course adding any books to, or removing them from, the archive. This last point was not given any more weight than the other

Fig. 1. "Swap, Drop and Roll" – The Situational Library, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, 2012 (installation view). (© Andy Simionato.)

series of participatory artworks. These works more or less appropriate and subvert the dynamic of a community book swap in

Libraries also permit an equal distribution of their potential for intervention. Every participant is equally able to shape the

possibilities. In short, it was not overtly framed as a book give-away or 'free-for-all'. Over the course of the installation the piles of books transformed in size, location around the room, and shape depending on the net activity of the day's visiting public, the front-of-house volunteers and the institute's technical and cleaning staff. Depending on which day one visited, the stacks of books could be found lining the walls, scattered across the floors (this often occurred after school group visits), arranged by size, or subject, or colour, or other harder to define criteria. By the end of the installation, the remaining books were removed and the Library was considered closed.

Habent Sua Fata Libelli

On the occasion of the International Symposium of Electronic Art (ISEA2013), a new Situational Library was created in the foyer of the New Law Building on the University of Sydney campus for the duration of the Symposium. This was followed by another installation of the Situational Library in the courtyard of the College of Fine Arts (COFA) in the University of NSW for the closing events of ISEA2013 hosted by the College.

As an evolution of the original model of the Situational Library, these new installations included the provision for the free exchange of the electronic surrogates of the book – the electronic book or e-book – and indeed almost any other form of digital file the visitor wished to share in the archive. The only limitation placed on the type of file exchanged was that it needed to be less than 10MB. Any further limitations (often in the form of restrictions of file type) to the sharing were due to the user's devices and their operating systems.

In the simplest terms this digital version of the Situational Library is a local open-access wireless network generated by a custom programmed computer that allows the visitors within the range of the network to join, upload, download and shape the archive. This network is not dependent on any other system or network, nor is it accessible through other networks, for example the Internet. The network's signal becomes inaccessible beyond a radius of approximately 10 meters, forcing participants to remain within close quarters.

Besides a user accidently noticing the free (unlocked) network appearing on his device's list of available networks, the project required strategies to raise awareness of its presence. The methods for raising this awareness for an otherwise 'invisible' library were three-fold. First, a number of physical books were freely
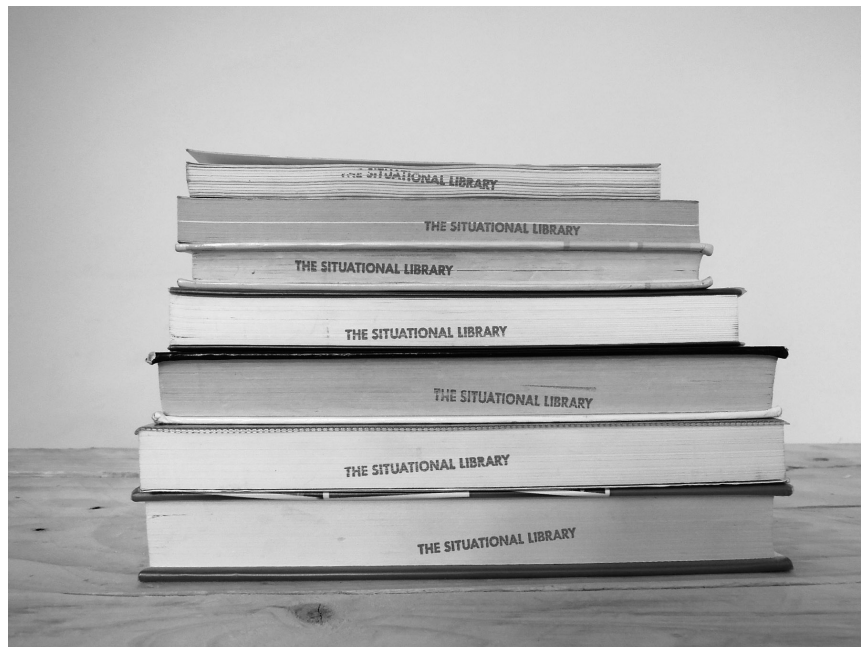

Fig. 2. The Situational Library stamp. (© Andy Simionato.)

distributed, all of which were stamped with the Situational Library stamp (the same used at the PICA event). Second, a display-stand of printed bookmarks with instructions on how to access the network was placed in a prominent position in the foyer of the New Law Building, and third, a number of large format posters were glued onto the walls of the space. In addition to these direct methods, another poster design was employed containing a more cryptic message with the Latin words *Habent Sua Fata Libelli* and a Quick Response (QR) code which once scanned by smart devices, directed users to the project's online information.

Habent Sua Fata Libelli is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata* libelli, meaning (literally) "According to the capabilities of the reader, books have their destiny" [5]. Walter Benjamin adopts this shortened form in his essay on book collectors *Unpacking My Library*, and in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* the phrase is interpreted as "Books share their fates with their readers" [6]. The posters printed with the Latin phrase were pasted around the site of the Situational Library and were very likely illegible to anyone seeing them who did not read Latin, or at least, anyone who was not already familiar with the quote, yet the QR code (a square machine-readable sign), placed prominently below the Latin sentence, offered their devices an easy path to interpretation. Language appears redundant, at least temporarily, and the 'reading' has been deferred to the machine.

So what will become of the *social uses* of the book if it loses its hegemonic dominance as a principle carrier of information?

1. Books are for Use
2. Every Reader his Book
3. Every Book Its Reader
4. Save the Time of the Reader
5. A Library is a Growing Organism

Ranganathan's five laws of library science (above) presented in 1928 and embraced by librarians around the world ever since, have found echoes in various scholarly texts for decades [7]. Yet the growing divergence between traditional models of the book and the places we build to house them has tested these 'laws', for "...it happens that the name of this place, Bibliothèque, gives its name to a place which, as it already does, will more and more in the future have to collect together (in order to make them available to users) texts, documents, and archives that are further and further away from both the support that is paper and the book form" [8].

Ranganathan's 'laws', seldom criticized and often cited, may soon be straining to hold true as the boundaries of the book are contested in electronic space. The mass digitization of books by projects such as Google Library (to name one among the many, more or less altruistic endeavors to build massive online repositories of books) and their deference of reading to the machine, affect the fate of the book, the archive and the library that holds them [9].

Perhaps Ranganathan's laws, and more importantly, our own assumptions of the library, may need to account for this new form of reading by the machine. Will it be sufficient to reconsider Ranganathan's 'Reader' to embrace both human and machine agency? Indeed, the underlying premise of this mass-digitization indicates that the electronic-book will be consumed primarily by machines (did we ever imagine otherwise?) for the very purposes of OCR and digital archiving, raising further questions about the human uses of what remains of the book [10].

Let us return, then, to the Situational Library, which I have described as an open, evolving, and publicly driven repository unconnected to any external network, specifically (and significantly) inaccessible through the Internet such that it obliges participants to be physically present to share digital files; close enough that they become aware of each other and their activities. I consider this exchange of 'energy' (the word is not ideal, but it's all I have for now to connote these situational interactivities) as becoming a primary function of the book, regardless of its form. Increasingly, but I suspect from its originality in some way, this is what the book is *for*.

I propose that with each exchange of the book, there is the potential for the exchange of something other, external to the book; of an energy inextricably connected to, but situated outside, the book itself.

The Situational Library is an attempt to make visible, if only for an instant, the exchange of such energies by those that share books. Every exchange of the book is potentially a library, and every library a situation.

Fig. 3. The Situational Library at ISEA2013, New Law Building, University of Sydney, 2013 (installation detail). (© Andy Simionato.)

8. J. Derrida, *Paper Machine*. *Cultural Memory in the Present*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005) p.7.

9. Google Book Library Project (2013), < http://www.google.com.au/googlebooks/library/index.html>, accessed 8 July 2013.

10. Google has carefully reworded their original hyperbolic claims of creating a digital archive of every book in the world to the more humble statement of providing a searchable 'card catalog'. In practice however, the project remains a mass-rendering of books into machine-readable data.

References and Notes

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4. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, U.S.A.: Black & Red, 1983).

5. Verse 1286 of *De litteris, De syllabis, De Metris* by Terentianus Maurus.

6. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, U.S.A.: Schocken Books, 1968).

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7. B.K. Sen, "Ranganathan's five laws," *Annals of Library and Information Studies* **Vol.55**, (June 2008) pp. 87-90.