

Natalie Tagge and Char Booth

Constructive destruction

Examining the life cycle of texts through RE:BOOK

For two years running, Claremont Colleges Library (CCL) in Claremont, California, has held RE:BOOK, a National Library Week contest that invites students to submit art projects made from worn-out books and other forms of cast-off paper. The event has been highly successful, establishing CCL as a curator of student work and inspiring beautifully creative projects from six of the seven institutions that make up the Claremont Colleges consortium.¹ RE:BOOK has also caused controversy, raising questions among some students and faculty about the propriety of intentionally repurposing books—objects that are considered by many to be inviolable and not suitable as fodder for re-expression. Which begs an important question: When does a book outlive its intended use, and what (legitimately) happens next? As a maker-spirited celebration/art show, RE:BOOK is one library's approach to not only acknowledging this question, but challenging its community to confront it head-on.

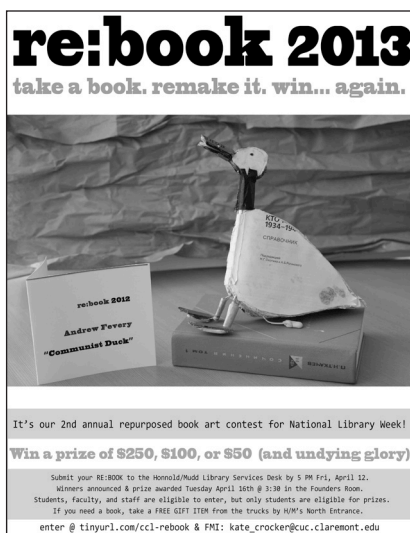
RE:BOOK origins

In the spring of 2012, the CCL Outreach Committee discussed creating an edible book contest for National Library Week,² but were concerned that our largely residential student

population might not have adequate kitchen space or equipment to prepare their creations. Discussion turned to alternate approaches and eventually arrived at a recycled paper art contest dubbed RE:BOOK. The project that followed was a collaborative effort of CCL's Outreach Committee and generously supported by Access Services staff.

CCL has held RE:BOOK for two successive years (2012–13).³ Contest rules are simple: we invite the colleges community to make creative submissions out of discarded books, article printouts, magazines, trash, or any other paper that has passed beyond its “traditionally useful life.”⁴ Formats, themes, and media are completely open, and

entries are judged by the CCL Outreach Committee based on a series of criteria, including technical skill, beauty, and uniqueness. Students, staff, and faculty are all invited to enter, but only students are eligible for the



RE:BOOK 2013 poster by Char Booth. View this article online for detailed images.

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three Amazon gift cards awarded to the winning RE:BOOKS.

Attribution is (of course) important to librarians, so we should note that this contest is by no means a new idea. The book arts are a long-celebrated form of creative expression, and many artists have repurposed books and recycled paper art, such as acclaimed Bay-area artist Lisa Kokin.⁵

A recent *New Yorker* article on book cultures chronicles the advent of a new community of “book fetishists” “that [celebrate] books neither as precious physical objects nor as utilitarian vessels but uses them as the raw materials for works of art.”⁶ Examples of artistically reused books are easily located via social media platforms such as Pinterest.⁷ Repurposed book contests have precedent in libraries—for example, librarians and art instructors collaborated at both Lakeview High School in Lakeview, Michigan, and Northern Virginia Community College to give students the opportunity to transform weeded books into art.^{8,9}

Reactions to weeding, recycling, and the book arts

RE:BOOK is about more than just repurposed books. Despite the digital transition, academia still produces a huge amount of wasted paper. RE:BOOK is CCL’s attempt to raise awareness of the life cycle of printed material by encouraging people to do something creative with that which might otherwise be trashed or recycled.¹⁰ One important (but perhaps little recognized) aspect of understanding and celebrating libraries is acknowledging that books and other tangible text objects, such as catalogs and magazines, have lifespans of their own, and are regularly read so many times or otherwise aged past their

prime (such as ripped, mildewed, etc.) that they can no longer be used for their original purpose.

In recent years, many have advocated for a more ecologically minded and/or reuse-oriented approach to weeded materials. Sarah Penniman and Lisa McColl’s “Green Weeding” article in *Library Journal* encourages librarians to donate, recycle, and repurposed discards to, in effect, pay paper forward.¹¹ CCL has long had a free book giveaway of donations that don’t fit our collection, some of which we provided to RE:BOOK participants as potentially repurposeable texts. In this spirit, RE:BOOK is CCL’s means of encouraging artistic recreations of our discards (and/or used paper of any form) that might otherwise simply “disappear.”

It is important to consider whether it is



RE:BOOK 2012 ribbons by Char Booth.

common practice for library users to consider the fate of materials that are worn, damaged, or gifted to a collection that has neither space or use for them; one clue lies in public reaction to large-scale weeding projects. When books and pe-

riodicals are trashed without discussion or intentional reuse, patron response tends to be swift, surprised, and disapproving, as evinced by the backlash against a mass weeding project at the San Francisco Public Library.¹² While the most highly publicized culling controversies covered in recent media have occurred at public libraries, academic libraries are not immune.¹³

During a large-scale deselection project at Virginia Tech in 1995, “dumpster divers” would periodically remove items and express their disapproval of the library’s [book disposal] decisions.” Not to imply that removing items from a collection is an easy task from the li-



20,000 Pages Under the Sea by Dean Shin.

brarian standpoint: a *Serials Librarian* article entitled “Drowning our kittens: Deselection of periodicals in academic libraries” reflects the distaste-tinged gravity with which many of us approach weeding.¹⁵

If culling is a natural part of a library’s collection development, where does this strong impetus among some patrons to “save” weeded materials originate? Rebecca Knuth’s research on the systematic destruction of books and libraries by 20th-century authoritarian regimes postulates that “many people respond to the violent destruction of books and libraries with deep emotion,” pointing to a psychological link between the censoring and burning of books and human acts of violence.¹⁶ Unfortunately, when non-reuse minded or rash weeding decisions are made, deselection may become justifiably conflated with “libricide” in the minds of patrons.

For example, at Augustana College an underused, rare classical Chinese collection was accidentally shredded leading to negative media coverage and the college’s President to suspend weeding.¹⁷ Visceral faculty reactions to a major CCL weeding project in the late

2000s points to the potential for reactivity to any perceived “assault” on texts or collections, and lingering memories of this event led to some of the (albeit modest) controversy surrounding CCL’s first altered book celebration in 2012.

RE:BOOK project themes and media

The 25 and 19 respective entries submitted for RE:BOOK 2012 and 2013 varied widely in theme and media. Discarded books, magazines, and printouts as well as glue, water, paint, spoons, dental floss, and a clock mechanism have all been used to create RE:BOOKs. Participants have used exacto knives to meticulously carve books into piano keys, an octopus, and the 2012 first prize-winning carousel.

Origami, sculpture, and paper-as-textile are also common approaches: our second-place winner in 2012 folded an article into an intricate swan, a 2013 contestant looped book pages into a ruffled Elizabethan-period collar, and a staff contestant who won the “judge’s choice” award in 2012 sewed old



2012 first prize, Faire Day by Alexandra Pincus.

issues of *Sports Illustrated* into a (theoretically) wearable mini dress.

Project themes have been varied and personal; one RE:BOOK symbolized the artist’s wedding ceremony, while another featured a *papier-mâché* sculpture of a contestant’s

torso with garland and ammunition belt as a message of feminist defiance. Many have been environmentally or politically themed, such as a full diorama of the Pomona College campus made almost exclusively from littered trash, and an interactive “decision tree” created from Al Gore’s *Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis*.

Other projects have included social/cultural commentary, such as the 2013 first prize RE:BOOK collage, “By Love Possessed,” described by creator Leo Estrada as a “comment on the current issue of marriage equality, and the concept of avoidance among the general population.”¹⁸

Community reaction and implications

Overall reaction to the program has been overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by strong submissions, reception/award ceremony attendance, local media coverage,¹⁹ and enthusiastic responses from participants. However, our initial RE:BOOK foray in 2012 did cause vocal consternation from one faculty member who objected to the perceived destruction of books. This strong reaction was influenced by the previously described controversial deselection process at CCL that alienated name faculty, less a criticism of RE:BOOK itself and more an indication that the need for clear communication around library deselection is essential for maintaining ongoing community faith in collection management processes, more so as we collectively reappropriate space and move toward prioritizing digital collections. In response to the faculty objection in our first year of RE:BOOK and probing questions from student media outlets, we took pains in 2013 to stress in media interviews

and promotional materials that the goal of the contest is to *repurpose* texts that would otherwise be destroyed.

We encourage RE:BOOK participants to make critical decisions about the materials they use, and stress that what constitutes the end of a text’s traditionally useful life is a question for our contestants to consider carefully. As 2013 winner Estrada stated: “I didn’t really think about what it meant to be ‘repurposing’ a book until I was getting ready to cut out the first page. It was unnerving at best, and I had to remind myself that the book would end up in a trashcan somewhere if it

wasn’t for this project . . .”²⁰ Clear and open communication about collection development, weeding, and other “behind the veil” aspects of processes long hidden can help us and our users make sense of complementarity of technology and print media.

Project development, promotion, and archiving

The success of RE:BOOK has depended on the hard work of a dedicated library Outreach Committee, aggressive marketing, and administrative support within CCL. Initial planning for both the 2012 and the 2013 RE:BOOK con-

tests began in February, nearly two-and-a-half months before submissions were due. Planning in 2013 was streamlined based on initial experiences in 2012. In 2013, the Outreach Committee was able to delegate tasks such as marketing, managing submissions, and planning the culminating RE:BOOK celebration at one in-person meeting supplemented with e-mail communication. In its second year, the Outreach Committee was able to repurpose a promotional plan developed to market drop-in research classes, (Love) Your



Paper Dress by Kathleen Kile.

Library workshops, and make the contest visible via a variety of print, e-mail, and social media methods.

A project raising potentially provocative questions about collections and text “destruction” requires strong administrative support, both to supplement messaging about the worth of such an endeavor to the community and to align the project to institutional goals. In his remarks at the 2013 RE:BOOK ceremony, Library Dean Kevin Mulroy linked RE:BOOK to the strong history of book arts and printing at the Claremont Colleges.²¹ This statement aligned RE:BOOK’s effort to build on collection strengths and foster creative community to ongoing colleges’ values; a strong endorsement of the project’s present and enduring value.

Unfortunately, the archiving of 2012 RE:BOOK projects was not considered when the Outreach Committee began planning. The committee learned from this experience, and RE:BOOK 2013 participants were asked to provide written permission for their work to be digitally archived when entering the contest. RE:BOOK 2013 artwork was photographed prior to the culminating celebration and quickly added to the Claremont Colleges Digital Library as well as promoted via the library’s Facebook page.²²

RE:BOOK into the future

By inviting participants to transform unwanted print material into art, RE:BOOK challenges creators and viewers to think critically about libraries and their responsibility as stewards of information. As with any innovative and slightly controversial outreach project, this effort was neither an unmitigated nor a guaranteed success. Through the hard work of a dedicated team of library staff and the enthusiastic community response, RE:BOOK has become a highly anticipated annual event. Its useful (albeit unintended) by-product of opening dialogue about the challenging side of collection management has opened important conversations about collection management and related issues.

The book is in transition—its format,

durability, exchangeability, and definition are all undergoing profound cultural shifts. Fears about the destruction of collections are warranted and an unfortunate by-product of a strain in resources and space, but the digital transition continues to challenge collective understanding of the “traditional” library.

Contests like RE:BOOK encourage the evaluation and celebration of print as resource, media, tool, and artistic object, and libraries as a space for doing so. They are a tangible means of acknowledging that few information formats are sacrosanct, and that students are capable of making considered decisions about the life span and re-application of printed matter.

RE:BOOK has shown us that these decisions tend to simultaneously value and reimagine texts by playing with embedded themes to explore personal and political meaning.

This trend is succinctly expressed by RE:BOOK 2013 participant Leo Estrada, creator of the winning collage that confronted same-gender marriage, who “had a great time altering my book, and knowing that it was an eco-friendly way to bring a little beauty into the world made it that much better.”²³

Acknowledgement

The contributions of the two authors of this article were equal.

Notes

1. The Claremont Colleges consist of Scripps College, Pomona College, Harvey Mudd College, Claremont McKenna College, and Pitzer undergraduate colleges, as well as Claremont Graduate University and Keck Graduate Institute.

2. See the long-running UIUC library contest at www.library.illinois.edu/ediblebooks/ and the newer UCLA contest at www.library.ucla.edu/news/edible-book-festival.

3. The “reuse/recycle” ethos of this event also tends to align nicely with Earth Day, which is celebrated annually on April 22.

4. See <http://libguides.libraries.claremont.edu/rebook>.

5. See www.lisakokin.com/book-art-spines-fragments-one.html.

6. Rachel Arons, "Internet book fetishists versus anti-fetishists," July 8, 2013, www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/07/internet-book-fetishists-versus-anti-fetishists.html#slide_ss_0=1.

7. For example, "Repurpose Those Discards" at <http://pinterest.com/grpsreads/repurpose-those-discards/> or "Repurposed Books" at <https://pinterest.com/europeanombie/repurposed-books>.

8. Margaret Lincoln, "Weeded books inspire student art projects," *Library Media Connection* 23 (3): 20.

9. Sylvia Rortvedt, "Text, image, and form: The altered book project," *Virginia Libraries* 53 (3): 27–28.

10. The tagline of RE:BOOK's contest Web site reads, "most of us have old paperbacks, printouts, magazines, textbooks, or notebooks lying around that are falling apart or have generally seen better days. Instead of recycling, how about a little creative repurposing that could net you (modest) fame and (a small amount of) fortune?" <http://libguides.libraries.claremont.edu/rebook>

11. Sarah Penniman and Lisa McColl, "Green weeding," *Library Journal*, 133 (15):32–33.

12. Phillip Matier and Andrew Ross, "S.F. library tossing thousands of books—Shelf-clearing at main branch assailed," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 29, 1996, A1.

13. Paul Metz and Caryl Gray, "Public relations and weeding," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31 (30): 273–79.

14. *Ibid.*, 276.

15. John Wood and Lynn Coppel, "Drowning our kittens: Deselection of deselection of periodicals in academic libraries," *The Serials Librarian* 3(3): 317–31.

16. Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide the regime-sponsored destruction of books and libraries in the twentieth century* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 1.

17. Rachel Warmke, "Augustana Library staff stirs anger over destruction of 18th century books," *Quad Cities Argus Dispatch*,

June 14, 2011, <http://qconline.com/archives/qco/display.php?id=548379>. Carla Tracy, "On mistakenly shredding a prized collection," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57(42), A23–A24.

18. Natalie Tagge interview with Leo Estrada, May 20, 2013.

19. Cleo Spencer, "Students recycle books to create art in 2nd annual Re:Book contest," *The Student Life*, April 19, 2013, accessed June 4, 2013, <http://tsl.pomona.edu/articles/2013/4/19/lifeandstyle/3935-students-recycle-books-to-create-art-in-2nd-annual-re-book-contest>. Cynthia Peters, "Pomona students sweep Honnold-Mudd Library's RE:BOOK Awards," Pomona College, April 19, 2013, www.pomona.edu/news/2013/04/20-art-book-winners.aspx.

20. Natalie Tagge interview with Leo Estrada.

21. The Denison Library at Scripps College has well established artist book and fine press printing collections (www.scrippscollege.edu/offices/denison/collections.php), while the library houses numerous hand printing presses.

22. See <http://bit.ly/ccl-rebook2012-fb> for 2012 and <http://bit.ly/ccl-rebook2013-fb> for 2013 contest photos on Facebook, and <http://ccdlib.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/search/collection/lea/searchterm/re%3Abook%202013/field/event/mode/all/conn/and/order/nosort> for Claremont College Digital Library archive of 2013 contest photos.

23. Natalie Tagge interview with Leo Estrada. ♪

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