

Cataloguing Collaboratively: Working Press, books by and about working class artists, 1986-1996

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Today I am going to talk about acquiring the Working Press archive, a self-funded publishers, that published books by and about working class artists (some artist books, with comics, some text books), 1986-1996, and working with the initiator (and donator) of the project, Dr Stefan Sczelkun, who is an artist, with an interest in publishing in traditional book format, and digital and multimedia. We acquired this roundabout September 2012

Firstly to give an introduction to the background of UCA although established as a university in 2008, we are comprised of various mergers of art schools that have existed since the 1870s. Our geographical split is currently two campuses in Surrey (Farnham, and Epsom) and three in Kent (Maidstone, Canterbury and Rochester) which all have archives and special collections, of which I cover all. We collect artistic archives and special collections, including individual artists and artistic organisations, and artist books, or rare/limited edition books by or about artists.

Giving a background to Working Press, it was initiated by Stefan Szczelkun , and Artist, Graham Harwood.

Stefan's experience of being Polish in Brixton Artists Collective from 1983 - 1987 led him to think about his other identity - that of being working class. He met Graham Harwood at the Bonnington Square Festival for Peace in 1985, who as well as producing paintings had worked as a graphic artist.

They decided to form a group of working class artists who wanted to self-publish books under a collective imprint. They published their first self-funded titles in 1987 and having managed to get Central Books to be their distributor they achieved sales that were able to sustain further publications.

Stefan invited almost every working class artist he met to self-publish, whether in written or graphic form. He has stated that while 'few artists have the energy, self-confidence and multiple skills to self-publish... the open invitation seemed a good way of networking and validating artists' work'. They had informal meetings and also one formal day conference.

The publications include the early works of artists like Graham Harwood; academic writer Matt Fuller; illustrator Clifford Harper; theorist Howard Slater

The collection represents a project that interconnects many issues within alternative cultural and social activity at the time. This is set in the background of British 1980s-90s politics, with class a prominent issue. The material, collected or generated by Working Press often comes across as anarchist or socialist. (It is also interesting to note that Poland was a communist state at the time)

Working Press looks at different perceptions of working class, women artists, disabled artists and different races and internationalities, and, for example, ways of encouraging more marginalised writers to be published, including women artist writers. It also includes items relating to writing a book about disability, including a draft manuscript about an author's dyslexia (very

prevalent in artistic individuals). It also explores the notion of an artist as an oppressed group (letters relating to the pamphlet 'Artists Liberation').

Working Press represents the technology, communications and networking of the time which was the cusp of the digital era, for example photocopy art. It also has a computer generated comic by Graham Harwood.

It gives an insight into self-funded publishing activity of the time, with many letters being self-described as 'begging letters', looking for donations to help kick start books.

The collection donated by Stefan includes the Working Press books, the artist books and pamphlets by other publishers collected by Stefan at the time of Working Press (inspiration for Working Press) (approximately 200), correspondence and letters relating to the Working Press, including reviews of the books, discussion of the books, requests for books, and publishing and networking activity, legal information, policy statements relating to the aims and the purpose of the Working Press, conference material, drafts Manuscripts, Finance, and distribution records, including address lists. These consist of three boxes, approximately 250 items

The collection was brought into UCA by Stefan initially talking to UCA's research cluster, bookRoom, which looks at the development of books, has the facilities for artists to create their own books, and has their own publishing title bookRoom Press. It, 'advances print production and dissemination in the digital age at the interface of photographic, graphic and text based interventions'. bookroom is linked to the Photography courses at UCA, and undertakes

inductions with Photography students. From their perspective they were interested in this collection from looking the development of the books, including the digital innovations, and inspiration behind the creation of books. Stefan and bookRoom then spoke to us in the library, to look at us acquiring the collection and making it accessible.

When initially looking at acquiring the archive, initial talks with Stefan showed that he would very much like to be part of the cataloguing description process, especially from an artist's and artistic viewpoint. Stefan mentioned seeing cataloguing as an artistic process in itself, looking at themes such as memory. He referred to the work of the artist Mark Pawson, who did a live cataloguing event of his work in 'unboxing'. As all Stefan's material was stuffed in boxes, he didn't know precisely what was in there, so as part of the cataloguing process he was interested in the idea of re-remembering items, and re-remembering in terms of hindsight.

We would also get an individual's artist's viewpoints on why they find material interesting.

In most basic terms talking to Stefan has been very helpful in learning about the history of Working Press (as related earlier), and his own personal reasons around the initiation of the collection, as well as the historical context at the time. It has also been useful for the contextual information related to the individuals, mentioned by first name within letters, or within illegible signatures. By talking to Stefan we are able to see who they are, and the history of their life as an artist. It is also possible to see whether they are the same artists that feature in our other collections. He has contactable details to some artists, and is intending to contact them, to look at the possibility of further contextual and personal information.

Stefan, bookRoom and I also discussed areas related to cataloguing, including definitions, arrangement and description. Definitions of an archive often differ, and it can be common in artistic practice to see a definition of an archive in a different way, e.g. the individual's memory as an archive. In this instance Stefan's material that he collected, regardless of provenance, including the pamphlets generated by different publishers of material, and his published working press books, was seen by him as his archive, as it was collected and developed by him. By talking to Stefan, however, the pamphlets, and artist books by other publishers, were part of the archive due to the context in which they were accumulated. They were collected by him in the context of the Working Press –e.g. looking for inspiration, and looking for writers that may potentially be able to write for the Working Press. Regardless of whether they are published or not it is important that the link between the unpublished and published material as part of the same collection is clear.

In terms of the arrangement, as the working press was initiated by two individuals, Stefan and Graham Harwood, Stefan was able to let us know that the material that was donated to us, was administered and collected by Stefan only, meaning that while the Working Press was the top level, then it was further divided into a subfonds level – material administered and collected by Stefan.

With the description bookRoom, run by lecturer and book artist Emmanuelle Ewackerele, was useful in looking at what type of information should be included.. For example as our students are visual then the design (for example images, any decorations, any cut marks on the letter), or how the writing is done, e.g. typewritten, computers, handwritten is just as important as the words. After talking to Emmanuelle and students who were undertaking books

for Photography projects the quality and type and materiality of the paper can also be vital to note. The importance of looking at the materiality of collections for artists was highlighted in the Artists in the Archives conference, where there was a display of damaged archives.

In terms of searchability and accessibility, as the unpublished material (e.g correspondence, conference material), pamphlets and artists books are seen as one collection, and should be all together, by Stefan and bookRoom, links to the published books are being put on the archives catalogue to the library catalogue. However, this is not ideal from a researchers' point of view, and searching between different catalogues is something that needs to be explored.

In looking at uncontrolled vocabulary to use, as well as talking to academics and students, talking and getting feedback from librarians also helps. Our librarians have now been divided into one cataloguing librarian, and a Learning and Teaching Librarian on each of the five campuses, who purely look at teaching Information Literacy, and undertake one to one tutorials, who can advise on typical interests and searches for students.

In terms of next steps, Stefan was keen to look at the possibility of an online presence with crowdsourcing, to increase engagement, due to the links and interest that Working Press has and should have with individual artists, different similar publishers, such as feminist publishers at the time, and organisations such as the Federation of Worker writers. Issues such as data protection need to be considered, especially given that this collection is so recent in the 1980s-90s, and that as well as information about the Working Press, they also touch on personal issues in individuals lives. There would have to be a careful selection of material. I have three volunteers who will be

undertaking initial scanning of material, using our facilities in the Digitisation Unit. These are Photography students who have been encouraged to use the collection by Emmanuelle from bookRoom.

Stefan wishes to enhance understanding of the collection with oral history recordings of artists involved in Working Press, and artists, organisations, and individuals who are interested in Working Press. As well as providing context, it can provide a personal viewpoint on why different items are of interest, and how it can be used and can be linked into the cataloguing process (recordings could be linked to the archives catalogue, and our internal image and sound repository image bank. Given views on how collections can be used are personal, then the person giving this context would clearly be noted.

On this note, on a more simple basis, I am also working with the Photography student volunteers mentioned before, to look at creating a physical visual guide of the collection, where, as well as general information, they are being encouraged to put their own personal responses to the collection, how they feel it could be used from an artist perspectives (which is a personal and curate an exhibition or small display (within the library). This would be intended to be a guide which could be added to, with future volunteers and interested parties.

In summary, working with the initiator of Working Press, and with bookRoom has led to greater understanding of the history of the collection, how the unpublished and published works link together, what areas to look at during cataloguing, and exploring ways to enhance the catalogue, including personal viewpoints. Having bookRoom involved has now also led to interested students working with the collection, giving a sense of ownership of the development, and leading to interest in how it is developed. Collaborative cataloguing allows a catalogue to be enhanced in a number of creative ways.

