An Independent Art Library for Naarm/Melbourne

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Melbourne Art Library was established in 2020, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, as a uniquely independent art library in Australia. The library's development – which may be equated to a kind of practice-lead-research exploring what a library is – has not been without its difficulties. Yet, despite this, the library is three years strong and provides a specialised lending collection of over 3000 books, a reading room, and an active program of public events.

Establishing an independent art library has not been without its challenges. Not least since it was first seeded in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. Yet, despite this, the Melbourne Art Library is now three-years strong and in the process of moving into larger premises, with a full calendar of programs and events, and a lending collection of over 3,000 specialist books.

Developed in 2020, the Melbourne Art Library is a small, independent library in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. It revolves around a twofold purpose – collecting and making available specialist art, design, and critical theory texts to any and all who are interested in the arts, and collecting and recording locally published (often self-published or small press) texts that are missing from other public collections and thus missing from narratives of arts practice in Australia. Through the library's development – which may be equated to a kind of practice-lead-research exploring what a library is – a third key purpose has emerged: to converse; to explore the idea of a library as a place of exchange beyond physical books, where ideas around art and design can be voiced and questioned and workshopped together.

The library began as a lockdown project. Finding myself suddenly out of work at the onset of COVID-restrictions, I decided to study librarianship, online, to fill the time, to be eligible for government study support payments, and because I was finding it difficult to get a job in a library without being a qualified librarian, despite experience. As I started studying, I reflected on why and where I would like to practice librarianship. My previous employment included work in the Research Library at the National Museum of Australia. I had loved working in a very small team with a specialised collection focussed on the social history, art, and environment of Australia. Thinking about other special libraries in the arts and social history realm, where I may wish to work, I quickly realised that there are few, if any, in Australia that are not attached to State or National museums and galleries, or universities. Just previous to this, I had had the bitter experience of visiting the library of my former university, attempting to borrow an art book and being told — in retrospect, predictably — that my borrowing rights were no longer active. I was surprised to suddenly realise the dichotomy of special and public libraries; that, in the so-called arts capital of so-called-Australia, where I lived, art books (generally expensive) were largely inaccessible to artists and artworkers (generally low paid). While public libraries allowed free browsing and borrowing, university buildings often required swipe-card access, and the State gallery's non-lending collection was accessible to researchers only. As the subject-specialty increased, access dwindled, with no existing art libraries allowing lending to the general public without a hefty price tag. Books (when accessible) were to be read in the quiet confines of reading rooms, which seemed at odds to the greater, messy and collaborative, context of art making in Australia.

In a strange way, Naarm/Melbourne's hard lockdown (100-ish days of lockdown, with curfews and strict limits on time and activities outside) provided the

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perfect opportunity to develop the project. The federal government's increase to social security payments for those out-of-work, and the removal of the obligation to apply for jobs provided a stretch of months in which I could work on art projects and earn a living wage. During those days inside, I read all I could about art librarianship, collected case studies of projects I admired overseas, and wrote a manifesto/dream/plan for an art library in my own city. I cold-emailed artists and archivists and artworkers that I respected and workshopped my idea with them, and with friends, over Zoom. By July 2020, I had pulled together a small team of friends and given the project the incredibly simple name of Melbourne Art Library.

Establishing a board, drafting rules of the organisation, and registering as a charity were reasonably straightforward steps in taking the project from concept to reality. However, the last important step of receiving deductible gift recipient (DGR) status[1] required many arguments with the tax office. In Australia, one needs a certain number of "responsible persons" on a board to achieve DGR status. The definition for responsible persons favours lawyers, doctors, and public servants, and did not acknowledge the professional standing of the artworkers and librarian on our board. After numerous arguments, we won the status. It was an early introduction to the fact of the project not neatly sitting within established definitions of practice.

At this stage, the other main challenge faced was more philosophical – and it is a tension which, productively, continues to underpin the organisation. It was a question of how much to lean into bureaucracy and existing structure, and how much to retain and champion flexibility. For we were not simply wanting to replicate independent art libraries elsewhere. While I may have been researching art librarianship, in establishing the library, I had not looked so much to other libraries as exemplars, but to artist-run-initiatives and other horizontally structured creative collectives, such as the UK architecture group Assemble. The project developed with a mentality of DIY direct action. As artist-run-initiatives sit counter to established commercial or institutional galleries, providing space for artists to exhibit the work of themselves and their peers, the library occupies a similar space. If not specifically artist-run, then at least arts-community-run for the arts community.

The question, then, was whether one best promotes a new model of an organisation – an independent and experimental library – and attempt to change the system — the system of the competitive art world, of the landscape of libraries, of the education system in Australia — with reference to the rules of existing structures (i.e. registering as a charity), or whether one covers more ground by working outside of these structures altogether. Some within the community saw the formation of the board and the steps to attain DGR status as unnecessary bureaucracy, as establishing yet another institution. In contrast, I saw these steps as a way of giving autonomy to the collection – which was now its own legal entity, rather than a project attached to me. It also, quite simply, meant the library was eligible to apply for government funding.

In the latter half of 2020, we began assembling the collection. To begin with it, it consisted of the fifty or so art books in my personal collection. From here, it grew through donations of one or two or a dozen books from individuals — solicited over Instagram, the first public face of the library, and email — and larger donations, from a rare books dealer and a university art library. In the latter case: weeded books which had been saved from the tip by a sneaky librarian on staff. As Esther Carlin, the artist behind our inaugural bookplate commission, wrote in an essay accompanying her work, we became "gleaners", collecting and caring for overlooked books.[2]

We launched a fundraising campaign, which covered establishment costs, including the purchase of a subscription to a cloud-based collection management system. This was an important early decision – to commit to cataloguing the collection in MARC21 according to RDA guidelines, despite the considerable cost of software. In October 2020, we began lending books. Once a week — with state-approved workers permits — we could leave the constraints of our locked-down homes and perform contact-less deliveries of books to readers across the city.

The team grew. Through an Instagram call out we got in touch with others; artists, students, librarians who were interested to join the project. In November 2020, fresh out of lockdown and a mere six months since the idea for the library had been seeded, we moved the collection out of my suburban bedroom and into

1. Status held by some charities in Australia which allows all donors to that organisation to claim a tax deduction on donations over $2.

2. Carlin, Esther "Gleaners" (accompanying text, 2021). https://files.cargocollective.com/c1156949/Bookplate-Essay.pdf

a space in the Nicholas Building, in the Naarm/Melbourne Central Business District (CBD) – an historic home to artist and arts organisations. The move was a necessity caused by my needing to move cities for work and the collection thus needing to move out of my bedroom, as much as it was a decision to give the library a public home. Whatever the circumstance, the reading room opened, lending books to the public four days a week.

The most pressing challenge we have faced, then and now, is that of funding. The library is inherently non-commercial; founded on the ethos of making books available freely to the public leaves little room for income generation. It relies on revenue from programming, donations, and grants. We realised early on that public libraries (usually run and funded by local government) do not readily lend themselves to grants; we were told we were ineligible for some of the community grants we applied for as we were an arts organisation, and yet, as an arts service organisation, we sat at the periphery of arts grants. Arts funding in Australia is scarce and competitive, and at all three levels of government the library must compete against more established ventures, against galleries and more traditional arts organisations. Further, Australian funding models are set up to support discrete projects – events, exhibitions – rather than operational costs. While we have been successful in achieving funding for public programming and residencies, current funding models make it difficult to bring in grants to cover our core recurring costs of rent and collection management. While the library has always enjoyed break-even and surplus positions, our limited finances mean that some key expenses remain out of reach, such as access to Libraries Australia, the Australian national bibliographic database.

Melbourne Art Library is a volunteer-run space, which comes with the joys and fatigue of volunteer labour. There are four of us who co-ordinate the art library,[3] juggling the commitments of the library, with our own full-time work and study, other projects, and personal lives. Physically, we are split across three cities, which is a hurdle of another kind. Many of our volunteers — of which there are 20-40 at any given time — have been with the library for over a year. While volunteer retention is strong, many volunteers have graduated into full-time work, reducing the number of hours they have available to give. There are downsides to volunteer labour, such as the reluctance to take on tedious tasks, the need to prioritise paid work and, at times, other projects, and the distaste of contributing to the status-quo of a chronic reliance on unpaid labour in the arts. Yet, there are also many joys. The group of us bring a great variety of perspectives and skills, a genuine belief in and passion for the project, and the cross-pollination of projects and ideas. We are a group of people who have congregated to scheme together. All volunteers are encouraged to develop projects within the library, and it has been pleasing to see what this has spawned – an art ephemera archive, reading groups, and other events.

While a certain degree of precarity might prevail, this state of operating is generative. Melbourne Art Library is an opportunity driven organisation, developing and learning through practice. The tension between following a plan and allowing the library to move with the tides is never inhibitive, rather it keeps us forever critical of our mission. A values-driven board and a well-developed strategic plan underpin our activities, while allowing for a certain nimbleness to our actions.

A question we have asked ourselves again and again, and have been asked many times, is who our audience is. This, too, is something that has been answered through practice and is never set. Broadly, our users are readers and makers: highly educated, theory-focussed practicing artists; artists who have had no interface with universities; those interested in art; a lot of graphic designers; and everything in between. Each event we hold draws a slightly different crowd. The conversations with borrowers make the whole venture worthwhile.

We have both sought out and been invited to engage in collaborative projects with other organisations and collectives, and each has been formative in its own way, introducing new audiences and ideas, as well as stretching our combined resources further than we could go alone. Collaborative projects and commissions have included working with designers Nicola Cortese, Stephanie Pahnis and Lauren Crockett in the development of a temporary reading room and a series of workshops and forum discussions at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art; events at the National Gallery of Victoria's Melbourne Art Book Fair, the city's annual architecture festival MPavillion, and Craft Victoria's Craft Contemporary Festival; a series of critical reading groups with the

3. Myself, Andrew Copolov, Jenna Muir, and Fi Wilson.

Shepparton Art Museum; and a virtual exchange with the Aotearoa/New Zealand gallery The Physics Room.

Our Creative Residents program has further urged us to reflect on and challenge what an art library can be and how art libraries and artists can interact. First Nations artist Jahkarli Romanis looked critically at the MAL collection and questioned the role of accessioning and weeding in deciding what information is and is not publicly accessible. As an intervention into the collection, Jahkarli used tracing paper to annotate and update a text in the collection relating to First Nations art. Jahkarli advocated for this use of palimpsest – the layering and altering of text – in the library, rather than the removal of problematic texts. Daniel Jenatsch created a chatbot trained on texts from the MAL collection, which he then instructed to compose poetry. He tested our collection development policy by requesting poetry – usually outside our collecting scope – be purchased with his small acquisitions budget. Ezz Monem scoured the collection for images, which he manipulated with AI to fabricate artefacts and create links between books in the collection.

Even our lending collection is shaped by community and opportunity. Apart from a handful of books bought for events or residencies, the vast majority of the collection arrived through donation. Even with a collection development policy (and we have probably only accessioned about 50% of that which has been offered), the collection is shaped by that which has been made available – reflecting the interests of our community while also bringing to lights some wonderful gems. In a way, the collection acts as our ballast. While artist-run-initiatives are able to exercise a certain transience, we are wedded to the physical bulk of our collection, as well as the responsibility to our patrons to keep it accessible and well looked after. The limited space of our shelving has meant that we cannot keep up with the supply in donations. There have been books we wished we could collect but simply did not have space for.

In recent months, the library's main challenge has been that of maintaining our reading room. To complement the difficult state of arts funding in Australia, the country is also facing a rental crisis. In 2023, the Nicholas Building – a 1920s building in the centre of the CBD, long home to a multitude of creative tenants – introduced rental increases of between 60-140%, forcing out many individual artists and not-for-profits. The library's board decided that we had to leave by April 2023, despite not being able to find any comparable or affordable space to move to.

Yet, as one door closes, another opens. Upon publishing details of the reading room's closure, the library was offered new premises in a 19th century warehouse on the northern edge of the CBD, next to the city's fresh produce markets, in a space currently co-tenanting with the experimental arts organisation Testing Grounds. At the time of writing, we are building and fitting out a new space within the building – double the size of our previous reading room, and set to open in early June 2023. Combined with a recent significant donation, we are excited to embark on the next phase of the library's research and growth.

Over the last three years, the Melbourne Art Library has grown from an idea on paper, conceived during lockdown, to a collection, a community, a reading room, and a mode of practice. There is nothing new about the idea of a library, of pooling together and making available resources to a community. Yet, we would like to think that we have made an impact on the arts ecology of Melbourne – changing the status quo just a little bit, to promote more collaborative practice and the sharing of information and ideas. Suggesting a librarianship mindset in the creation and sharing of art.

Often, we have asked ourselves, 'what is the minimum infrastructure required for a library to be a library?' Does one need books, shelves? As we shape-shift, we continue to question this. What we come back to is exchange and collaboration. The library is a space for conversation and the testing of ideas.

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