The production of art freed from the restraint of the Academy and The Church, has evolved into a research-based practice starting from the mid-20th century. This trajectory continues well into the 21st century as evidenced by the development of PhD programs in studio arts at many North American and European universities, and embodied in the work of such research-based artists as Steve Kurtz and Critical Art Ensemble. Art making is recognized as a legitimate intellectual activity in itself. As a former architect and new librarian, I have considered how this intensification of research into contemporary artistic practice plays out in the space of the library, and the services and resources we librarians provide to patrons who are artists.

Traditionally, art libraries supported the research needs of art historians, but such seminal studies as librarian Derek Toyne’s survey of art students published in the ARLIS Newsletter in 1975, demonstrate that librarians have long been thinking of the implications of library organizing systems, resources and services on artists. ¹ Hemming, in “An Empirical Study of the Information-Seeking Behavior of Practicing Visual Artists”, examined the existing, scant literature on the information needs of artists, and broadly summarized the five purposes for which artists conduct research: to seek inspiration, to locate specific visual elements, to gain knowledge of materials and techniques, for marketing and career guidance, and to ascertain current trends in the art world. ² Hemming, in “The Information-Seeking Behavior of Visual Artists: A Literature Review”, also points out that there has been no comprehensive study on the information seeking behaviors of what he calls a “community of practicing artists”, and that any information professional “wishing to create an information service for artists today will be nearly as information-deprived as Toyne was 40 years ago.” ³

Background on the Panel Discussion

In May of 2010, I was appointed to be a student representative for the Ontario chapter of ARLIS/NA. In approaching the Executive of 2010 with an idea for organizing a panel discussion between artists and librarians, Tammy Moorse, then chapter Chair, offered to work with me to realize this project. The panel discussion, which we “Research Intersections within Practice: Artists and Librarians”, was hosted by ARLIS/NA ON, and held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto on March 16th, 2011. Our intent for the panel discussion was to explore the different
approaches of research and information gathering by artists during the process of art production, and to address current directions in studio pedagogy and practice and the role that art information professionals can play as facilitators of the creative process. The panel of six speakers was comprised of practicing artists, post-secondary studio educators, art librarians both past and present, and an archivist. The speakers who participated were: Ian Carr-Harris, Lisa Steele, David Poolman, Adam Lauder, Eric Schwab, and Amy Marshall Furness.

Ian Carr-Harris is an artist whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally since 1971, including the Venice Biennale. In 2007 he was named a recipient of the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. He also has Bachelor of Library Science from University of Toronto and worked as a librarian at the Ontario College of Art and Design University’s (OCAD University) Dorothy H. Hoover Library. Ian currently teaches within the Sculpture/Installation, and Criticism and Curatorial Practice streams at OCAD University. Lisa Steele produces videotapes, performances and photo/text works that have been exhibited in festivals, museums and galleries around the world. Lisa with her partner, Kim Tomczak, received the Governor General’s Award for lifetime achievement in Visual and Media Arts in 2005. She is a co-founder of Vtape and teaches at the University of Toronto in the Department of Art where she is the Graduate Program Director of the Visual Studies program. David Poolman works in a variety of mediums including drawing, video, print media, and installation, and has exhibited in art galleries and screened in festivals both in Canada and internationally. He is currently a professor teaching drawing, video and sound at Sheridan Institute in Oakville, Ontario. Adam Lauder is a librarian and the W.P. Scott Chair for Research in E-Librarianship at York University’s Scott Library. Lauder is currently working with Ian Baxter&, regarded by many as Canada’s first conceptual artist, on an e-raisonne documenting the artist’s career. Eric Schwab is the manager of digitization and preservation at the Toronto Reference Library. Amy Marshall Furness is the Special Collections Archivist at the E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

Though our original intent was to explore the relationship between libraries and studio art education at the post-secondary level, much of what was discussed that day I feel also speaks strongly to the needs of practicing artists operating without institutional supervision, and often without, or with very limited access to specialized academic libraries. Mason and Robinson, in “The Information-Related Behavior of Emerging Artists and Designers: Inspiration and Guidance for New Practitioners”, have pointed out that most studies already undertaken by art librarians have focused on students and educators of art or art history, “rather than on practicing artists, and are therefore likely to show rather different purposes and behaviors.”
have the most to offer to these practicing artists who operate independently seeking out the resources and services of public, academic and museum libraries and archives. Furthermore, as stated by panelist Adam Lauder,

> [A]rtists’ use of information could be a model for the kind of interdisciplinary information use that the library has to prepare in the future in becoming a more dynamic site where information can be pulled from multiple sources, and can be used to help connect interdisciplinary research teams, in order to facilitate the kinds of more adventurous research practices that we are already seeing and will continue to see in the future.\(^5\)

In considering the information needs of contemporary art practice that according to Lauder, “challenges all of the sort of disciplinary conventions and the ones that the library traditionally serves”\(^6\), opens up not only specialist art libraries to new kinds of research possibilities, but also public and central academic libraries as well. It is within this larger context of art production that I would like to situate the three themes that emerged over the course of the of the “Research Intersections” panel discussion.

**Art Monographs and Catalogues**

One dominant theme was the importance of the book, mainly the printed art monograph. Ian Carr-Harris related a discussion he had with some of his studio students: “The students by in large said, well the Internet is available everywhere, of course even libraries have the Internet available in stations” [but] “the Internet cannot deliver what the library can, which is the large, beautifully produced monograph.”\(^7\) One of Ian’s students stated she was certain “the brain works differently when faced with print than when faced with a screen image.”\(^8\) This anecdotal observation reflects the findings of recent studies into online reading and research habits. In a report commissioned by the British Library and JISC, a UK education consortium, to investigate the impact digital resources have on the information behavior of the ‘Google Generation’, the University College London scholars who conducted the study found people do read very differently online.\(^9\)

In examining the logs of research sites, the researchers observed in the digital realm users exhibit ‘horizontal information seeking’ described as “[a] form of skimming activity, where people view just one or two pages from an academic site and then ‘bounce’ out, perhaps never to return.”\(^10\) The researchers also concluded “users are not reading online in the traditional sense, indeed there are signs that new forms of ‘reading’ are emerging as users ‘power browse’ horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins”, and “[i]t almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.”\(^11\) Maryanne Wolf, a
professor of child development and Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, goes even farther, saying this skimming behavior is not just a benign reaction to multi-tasking and increased information processing online, but that “digital culture’s pervasive emphases on immediacy, information loading, and a media-driven cognitive set that embraces speed” is in fact endangering the cognitive processes in the human brain that support “inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight.”  

She explains “[h]uman beings were never born to read,” but learning to read “enables the brain to form new connections among the structures underlying vision, hearing, cognition, and language” – basically that deep reading wires the brain to develop the necessary connections needed for deep thinking. If we consider production of art as a contemplative intellectual pursuit, what is the speeding up of reading and processing images online potentially doing to art making and the deep thinking it requires?

Lisa Steele offered another reason why the book is still the most important key research resource for artists today maintaining “[t]he place where there is any serious writing going on is in monographs and catalogues” as “art journalism is not even on life support, it’s on the way to the crematorium — it’s finished.” Newspapers struggling with declining readership in an attempt to save lost revenue often reduce themselves to operating with a ‘skeletal culture staff’ — how long will it be before the ‘soft reporting’ found in culture or arts sections is done away with entirely in favor of what András Szántó, in London’s The Art Newspaper, calls ‘boys stuff’ or “‘hard’ reporting on wars and money and sport” Szántó contends that reducing article lengths, and replacing specialist art writers with generalists in what is left of arts and culture reporting “has eviscerated newspapers’ ability to deliver quality arts coverage, which, as a result, must migrate elsewhere.” As well, the art world has witnessed the demise of several important art periodicals, and scholarly journals, and is likely to lose more in the face of the continuing contraction of the magazine publishing industry.

Library as Place/Space

David Poolman also stressed the relevance of printed books as the shelves provide “a place for concentrated browsing.” This comment speaks to the next theme as well, that the library is an essential physical space for artistic practice. Most of the studies in the area of artists’ information needs, including those carried out by such librarians as Toyne, Budd, and Littrell, firmly support that “[f]or most information needs, browsing is the strongly preferred behavior.” Within browsing, artists display a variety, perhaps even contradictory range of sub-behaviors such as “undirected, serendipitous browsing” for inspirational purposes preferred by art students, found through both surveys and the observations of librarians, to other studies by
Cobbledick that insist that that browsing is in no way accidental, but that “most artists had a specific need in mind at the time they looked for information, and that browsing was carried out only within clearly defined areas.” Whatever version of browsing employed, ease of access is critical to unimpeded browsing, and as David Poolman points out, though libraries have embraced electronic resources, “through digitization everything gets hidden. It’s harder to find things.” Ian Carr-Harris also stressed the relationship between the physical space and browsing, saying,

...along the shelves they, [students], can have a physical experience seeing this book against that book. It’s all there. You might say the shelves stretch infinitely in all directions and they just have a sense that there is a huge amount of stuff all right there right in front of them they can grab and hold. So that is quite different from the links on the Internet."

The physical library is not just a space for research, but is potentially in service to information processing, a point of entering discourse and a site for artistic intervention. Ian Carr-Harris identifies the library as “primarily an architectural space rather than archival space” and artists work in the library because,

...it is a place of peace and quiet where they can reflect and contemplate. And it has a kind of expanded, visually, expanded volume architecturally speaking. And they actually find their thinking expanding whether they are working with that beautiful monograph or not, just by being in that space.

One of the fundamental tenants of architecture is that the spaces we occupy have a significant influence on our behaviors and thoughts, and with libraries the physical and social space may be another inspirational element and aid in deep thinking for art production.

David Poolman related the story of a family friend who was a public librarian in London, Ontario that would bring in artists to do talks. David said these events were an “entrance in to the art world that wasn’t necessarily happening in galleries”, and that the role of the library could be to support professional practices where it is not available elsewhere. Ian Carr-Harris stressed librarians that facilitate events, such as artists talks, provide to the professional artist not just the ability to “to sit in an audience and to listen to colleagues, to fellow professionals” but to engage with quite often very dense discourse long after they have ended their formal studies.

While events like these abound in metropolitan centers with large art communities and abundance of galleries, museums and educational institutions, access in smaller communities is far more limited. In smaller communities, the public library may be the only public or community space for artists to engage with each other.
Lisa Steele added that while she could appreciate “in smaller communities libraries are very active hubs for things like poetry readings, music, and artist’s talks”, she would like library spaces to open themselves up to artists as there are potentially more substantial “ways to kind of vex the collection without hurting it.” 32 She said she would like to see libraries invite artists in to do something, and gave Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* as a prime example of what could very easily be done within a library space. 33 In this groundbreaking 1992 work, Wilson reshuffled the Maryland Historical Society’s collection to highlight the history of Native and African Americans in Maryland. Eric Schwab stated he would like to see the libraries be more receptive to artist installations and interventions as the Toronto Reference Library had already experienced success with “Rock the Library”, a program that invites rock and punk bands to play in the library challenging perceptions of libraries as quiet spaces, and dispelling antiquated stereotypes of librarians as shushing spinsters. 34 Ian Carr-Harris’s added,

Apart from being an architectural space, the library is also an institutional space. In that sense from the point of view of the contemporary artists, who have been for some time involved in institutional critique, the library offers an amazing opportunity to include the library as part of that institutional critique in contemporary art. We can perhaps focus on as well on the library as an institution, as a thing, as a historical entity, with all the politics and the power that goes with it and see how contemporary artists can actually address that. 35

**Digitization**

While the importance of monographs and catalogues and the library as place may suggest the speakers’ inclination towards the material, the third theme that dominated the discussion was the value of digitization to contemporary art practice, though this was discussed with much trepidation. Eric Schwab said that he felt he could get patrons, especially younger ones, interested in older non-circulating and archived audio-visual art materials by converting them to a “format they can access online” on video-sharing websites. 36 He added that one of the greatest challenges facing him in his position was keeping up with movements in technology, specifically “migrating media and keeping and preserving that media.” 37 David Poolman stressed that online digital repositories, such as Archive.org, were fast becoming the most important resource to contemporary video and media artists, adding “[t]here is something interesting I think about having the original document, but also having that digital document — it can become an original document onto itself afterwards.” 38
Lisa Steele and Ian Carr-Harris, as practicing artists with a longer history, were far more critical of the movement to digital formats, and the reliance on the Internet and commercial browsers for research purposes. Lisa commented,

Libraries used to keep everything but now there is so much stuff they can’t keep everything. So now they are deciding what to keep, and who in the future will decide what to keep. We are having an interesting Vera Frankel moment, where it’s like there is too much information, and the map is still being drawn.” 39

Ian Carr-Harris’ final comment addresses what is currently at issue with an Internet whose access is dominated by Google, a for-profit entity with questionable ethics, and is under attack from government attempts to enact restrictive laws surrounding its use by the average citizen. In summary, Ian Carr-Harris said,

…the digital universe is magical, it’s wonderful, it’s fantastic and it’s incredibly diverse, BUT it’s also run by institutions that have something to gain by it. They have an agenda and even if that agenda is relatively benign it reaches into decision making in what in fact is going to be on the Internet and what is not.

As we shift into the digital age we will actually find huge amounts of data that is perhaps, quite likely in fact, critical of the dominant concepts that are being played out. We will find that data being lost. The degree to which the library becomes digitized, is also the degree to which it starts to lose a lot of the scholarship. It could actually offer an alternative understanding of certain phenomenon …if that artist is making work along a trajectory within the discourse which they assume to be the main one, or the only one, and if that discourse is being dominated by the Internet, then in fact they will never know there was a critique there that was possible though the actual information, the knowledge base that could have been there, that isn’t there, but was ditched by the agencies that developed the Internet.

So how does the library help the artist? The library helps the artist by ensuring a broad base of knowledge, in depth, as well as breadth, as possible. 40

Supporting Artists’ Unique Information Behaviors and Needs

In reflecting back on what was discussed during the course of the “Research Intersections” panel discussion, I present the following suggestions for libraries wishing to provide better support for practicing artists. These suggestions are in addition to creating programs for artists, having a variety of study spaces to support both solitary and communal contemplation, and inviting artists to create art in and of the library. First, one cannot stress the
importance of continuing to purchase those high quality catalogues and art monographs enough, and to also endeavor to select from small and alternative publishers to ensure the future growth and diversity of the industry. As contemporary artists require a great deal of information across a very broad range of subject matter that has “no epistemic relationship to art per se” 41, libraries serving artists should strive to collect far outside the traditional art and design classes. While this is not a burden on public libraries, or central academic libraries, for a small library serving an art school this can be a challenge in the face of limited space and resources. The librarian, in order to select materials wisely, needs to establish strong relationships with the teaching faculty, know the curriculum and understand the information needs of institution’s community of users to determine the amount to which the library needs to support research outside of the fields of art and design.

Art librarians should also consider access to the collection, as Cowan points out creative and visually oriented users may not search for materials according to the same logic and means that verbally or textually oriented users would employ, and to treat these differences not as a wrong way of searching, but to support them. 42 During the panel discussion’s question period, an audience member that identified herself as a practicing artist, stated art libraries would best support serendipitous information seeking by keeping “their catalogues stupid.” 43 She added library catalogues and other search tools that utilize Google-powered searches could hinder those accidental discoveries that artists thrive on as Google is known to limit search results based on IP address. 44 Rachel Clark, in her chapter from The Handbook of Art and Design Librarianship, titled “Cataloguing and Classification for Art and Design School Libraries: Challenges and Considerations”, says though “the library catalogue, as an index and inventory of holdings, seems antithetical to the serendipitous discovery preferred by artists”, there are many changes that can be done to support collection browsing both physically and virtually. 45 Clark advocates full integration of all material formats into the library catalogue as “[i]nformation ‘silos’ are especially troublesome for arts library users” and stresses the importance of integrated access via the library’s online catalogue for specialty databases and digitized content created in-house. 46 This is of special concern for access to those rare and fragile materials that cannot be housed on open stacks for ready browsability. 47 Clark also says the inclusion of cover images, which is supported now by many catalogue software packages, serves visually inclined patrons well, and assists artists in making the connection to items in the catalogue and locating them physically on the shelves. 48 Bare-bone records resulting from a historic tendency favoring brief bibliographic description, or the purchasing of vendor-derived records fail to assist artistic, creative and visual users discover material. Clark here stresses
enhancing metadata and providing ‘full level’ cataloguing that meets the requirements of second level description as per AACR2, to provide increased access and improve retrieval. Enhanced records for art research should include a table of contents especially for “materials with chapters or sections named for designers, art movements or other common search queries”, and contents notes summarizing variant key words, topics and phrases used today by curators and educators, rather than specialized library vocabulary that may not reflect the terminology used by artists. The physical environment can also support or hinder the use of libraries by art practitioners. Traditional signage with call number ranges do not take advantage of the visual cues that creative, visual and artistic users favor, and here Clark suggests using ‘genre’ way finding signage and color coding to aesthetically support the classification system, browsing and help the library seem less labyrinthine for artistic users who may not be numerically inclined.

**Concluding Remarks**

Rather than attempting to conclude with a statement to neatly tie up a discussion that is still very much in flux and constantly transforming in the face of continuous cultural, political and technological upheavals, I would prefer to leave you with two comments to consider. Lisa Steele ended the panel discussion with the following:

> [Libraries, but in particular] public libraries are the basic mark, or even the only progress towards freedom it seems to me that was made in perhaps the past 300 years. It’s places where people who don’t have any other places to go, can go still. That creates an environment within which you can have a bit of thought, and …discourse. No one is suggesting that anything would disappear, but we are trying to cope with certain things. The actual architecture is a sheltering architecture …in cities and in small communities. It seems they are a bellwether of how things are going.

Finally, to borrow from Kathleen O’Neil’s chapter “Contemplation, Conservation and Community: Challenges of the Small Art Library” from *The Handbook of Art and Design Librarianship,* “libraries are generally considered places set apart from the world; even angels are drawn to them when on earth.”

**Notes**


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Ibid, 294.

11. Ibid, 295.


13. Ibid.


15. Carr-Harris et al., “Research Intersections.”


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


20. Toyne, “Requests at Falmouth School of Art.”


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.


43. Carr-Harris et al., “Research Intersections.”

44. Ibid.

45. Rachel Clark, “Cataloguing and Classification for Art and Design School Libraries:

46. Ibid, 117.

47. Ibid.


49. Ibid, 121.

50. Ibid, 122-123.

51. Ibid, 119-120.

52. Carr-Harris et al., “Research Intersections.”