Unexpected Legacy Collections: What it means for Libraries
Deborah Ultan Boudewyns, March 31, 2012

Addressing the concept of Collecting New Information Objects, this panel session will discuss a special area of collecting including archival collections of the history of artists and their artists’ books, alternative presses or zines. Within the maturation of the field of artists’ books are the growing collections of artist bookmakers, zinesters, and alternative presses. The first generation of artists and presses that, in the late 20th Century, identified as interdisciplinary artist book artists or zinemakers rather than printers, publishers or fine press proprietors, is aging and leaving an incredible legacy behind. In the past few years, Booklyn (in NYC) has started to develop an Archives and Collection Program that helps artists sort, inventory, catalog and sell their archive and cultural collections to educational institutions. In turn, Booklyn, also, assists institutions in finding, acquiring archives and collections that will substantially add to their teaching resources. With the increasing digital environment, these print materials are becoming more important and more valuable. Our panelists today will help you to envision these sorts of materials into our library collections. They will share personal stories that reflect their passion for seeking, collecting, and using these newly perceived information objects. They will share their process for managing them, making them accessible, and the context from which to derive their educational value.

Two outstanding examples of alternative collections include, first, Bongout (Good Taste), is a newly available archive which includes the collection of the first A5 xerox collective zines with silkscreen covers, created by its founder, Meeloo Lucien Gfeller, to the work produced from 2001 between
Meeloo and Anna Hellsgard. Since 2001, they focused on silkscreen production. Their content is intended to be, as they say: “…an alternative to the mainstream but we don’t position ourselves against it.” Their philosophy proposes that: “When you’re an artist and there’s a lack of people publishing your work, one answer to that problem is just start up your own company and support the amazing artists around you…” Further points: “Why bother trying to find a publisher when you can make a zine yourself? Loads of artists use the medium of self-publication as a means of exhibiting their work, offering to the public a piece of art at a considerably lower price than in a gallery.” The collection of archives from Bongout includes such items as The Pot Pourri de Bongout which is 30 x 40 cm with 80 different screen prints from 35 artists representing 11 countries.

The other rich example is Eric Drooker’s archive of scratchboard drawings of his influential graphic novel “Flood”, which is now in the Comics and Graphic Novel Collection of the Print and Drawing Department of the Library of Congress.

Susan Thomas from Long Island University will speak about her voyage into the collecting of alternative press materials and how to infiltrate library collections and policies for use in teaching; Stephanie Grimm from the University of Michigan, will also speak about building new info object collections in academic libraries, specifically, minicomics; Celina Williams and Leila Prasertwaitaya from Virginia Commonwealth University, will bring home the point that while one trend is to go digital another is to work deeply with print media and print media culture. All of the panelists are doing insightful work within libraries in a way that favors visual press culture that is indicative of our time. I am honored to have them here collectively.
Over the course of the year, I have had discussions with a visionary vendor who is cultivating relationships with libraries to see that artist collections, collections of the zines, mags, and artists’ books are appropriately placed in libraries. Marshall Weber, Artist and Directing Curator of Booklyn Artists Alliance and I have mapped out a way of thinking about alternative collections: There is a *social geography* of these sorts of materials/collections that preserves the time capsule from which they have evolved; there is a *performance and process* that goes into the making and production; there is the concept of the *collection as an object*; and the powerful *visual component* of these information objects. Finally, today, there is significant tension between *print & digital* formats. The impact and meaning libraries can have by making “alternative” materials/collections accessible addresses the print/digital tension, while preserving their social geography, performative character, and rich visual component.