Information Visualization and the Interpretive Frames Offered by Artists’ Books
Regina Pagani, Arts, Humanities, Experiential Learning Librarian, Northeastern University Libraries
Steven Braun, Data Analytics and Visualization Specialist, Northeastern University Libraries

This poster describes a work-in-progress workshop to facilitate guided exploration of a curated collection of artists’ books for students in an information design and visualization MFA program. Specifically, this collaborative workshop aims to interrogate them through several different lenses: the materiality of data, intentionality of form, and the nature of interpretation. These lenses are explored through activities that invite the students to apply information visualization design thinking to their engagement with the books. This workshop presents one model for how library collections may be leveraged as a focal point for new pedagogical experiences across campus.

At Northeastern University, there are many campus populations that practice or do research in information design and data visualization. These include the Northeastern University Visualization Consortium, the MFA program in Information Design and Visualization, programs in the School of Journalism focused on data journalism, and visualization research focus areas in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences, to name a few. Together, such initiatives offer diverse and interdisciplinary understandings of visualization that highlight the field’s unusual importance on campus.

We define information visualization as the use of visual encodings to represent information (data) in a way that facilitates exploration, discovery, and analysis. In the majority of visualizations, those visual encodings are conventionally digital; in contrast, artists’ books provide a tactile and physical medium of communication, through which it becomes possible to rethink established modes of production in visualization and its digital forms. We propose here the concept for a workshop that uses exploration of artists’ books to interrogate the relationship between digital and tactile media of storytelling through the lens of data visualization. Designed for students in Northeastern’s MFA program in Information Design and Visualization, this workshop uses as inspiration the book After Reasonable Research... by Miranda Maher, which can be interpreted as a data visualization in artist’s book form.

To connect the students’ own disciplinary knowledge to artists’ books, this workshop explores our engagement with artists’ books through interpretive lenses that are based on foundational concepts in information design and visualization. These concepts, as defined in the lenses in the diagram at right, include the materiality of data, issues of form and representation, and the nature of interpretation. In this way, we can think of visualizations and artists’ books as questioning the relationship between content and form in parallel ways.

The first interpretive lens considers the materiality of data and the signature of the creator, asking how book-as-form mediates our access to the knowledge presented within them and how that mediation is negotiated by the artist. The second lens considers intentionality of form, exploring how artists’ books interrogate the book form as mediator of its content and our experience of it. The final lens considers the nature of interpretation, examining interpretive versus performative modes of reading the book. In the same way that studies in information visualization critique the fixity, authority, and permanence of a given visualization, these lenses ask the same of the book.

By the end of the workshop, participants should be able to interpret artists’ books through several lenses that leverage their understanding of key concepts in information visualization, in turn encouraging them to examine how they play with convention and form in their own work and creative practice. In the future, this workshop could be expanded to involve participants creating artists’ books of their own. This workshop models one interdisciplinary example of using artists’ books for new pedagogical purposes in information design and visualization curricula.