

What's the title? some challenges when cataloguing artists' books

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Artists' books are works of art in book form. They examine ideas, themes, the nature of the page, sequence, the book form and more. They can be codex, concertinas, fold-outs, pop-ups, sealed closed or of other construction. They can be made of different materials including textiles, metal, shoes or match boxes and they can employ many different techniques of manufacture.

Many artists' books contain title pages and colophons carrying bibliographic details and pose no or few difficulties for the cataloguer. However, others do not follow bibliographic conventions, lacking title pages and/or significant pieces of information. This may be because the artist is not interested in the bibliographic elements, is intentionally omitting them or because such conventions will spoil the layout and flow of the book or are out of keeping with the spirit of the work. This can cause challenges for the cataloguer. Artists' books are held by many different types of libraries including academic libraries and museums and galleries libraries, for example University of Arts London Libraries (including Chelsea College of Art & Design Library and London College of Communication Library), Winchester School of Art Library, Scottish Poetry Library, Tate Library and Archive and National Art Library. They tend to be held in special collections closed to general access. Therefore, access is through the catalogue, making the catalogue record of upmost importance. This article discusses the descriptive catalogue record indicating some of the difficulties that a cataloguer may face in cataloguing artists' books.

Catalogue records for artists' books should be as full as possible giving at least the artist's name, title, statement of responsibility, publisher, date of publication, collation/physical description, and notes fields. The artist's name and the title of the work are naturally the most important identifiers of an artist's book.

It is recommended that the artist should be given as main entry even when a text author is present. *Pandæmonium* takes a text from *Paradise lost* by John Milton (see Figure 1). The extract describes Satan returning to Hell. He and the fallen angels are turned into snakes. The text is printed in red around an undulating snake consisting of the letters a and e and æ ligatures. The text is Milton's, but the person responsible for the book is Rachel Marsh and her name should be entered in the 100 field.



Figure 1. *Pandæmonium* / Rachel Marsh.
© Rachel Marsh



Issues may arise around the artist's name. Artists may choose to work under a pseudonym, disguising their identity or authorship of the work. On the title page of *Unforeseen alliances* Sally Alatalo describes herself as "Sally Alatalo writing as Anita M-28", while Sophie Loss, who usually publishes under her own name, chose to give the name Victoria Simpleton as the statement of responsibility in *July thigh*. Artists sometimes consciously play with their name, for example *Bynames : an anthology of invented names for real people* contains wordplay names and naturally the name given on the title page and the cover (they are different) are plays on the artist's name, Alec Finlay (see Figure 2). If a pseudonym is used the cataloguer has to establish or decide whether the pseudonym is a one-off or whether the artist is establishing a separate identity. The artist's name can be hidden behind other information. *Serviette stories* lacks a statement of responsibility, only stating on the colophon of that it is "Printed by ABPress at Denchar Mill, Yarrow". ABPress is the press of Angie Butler, who regularly visits and works at Helen Douglas's home and press at Denchar Mill. Angie Butler is responsible for the book but her name is not on the work.

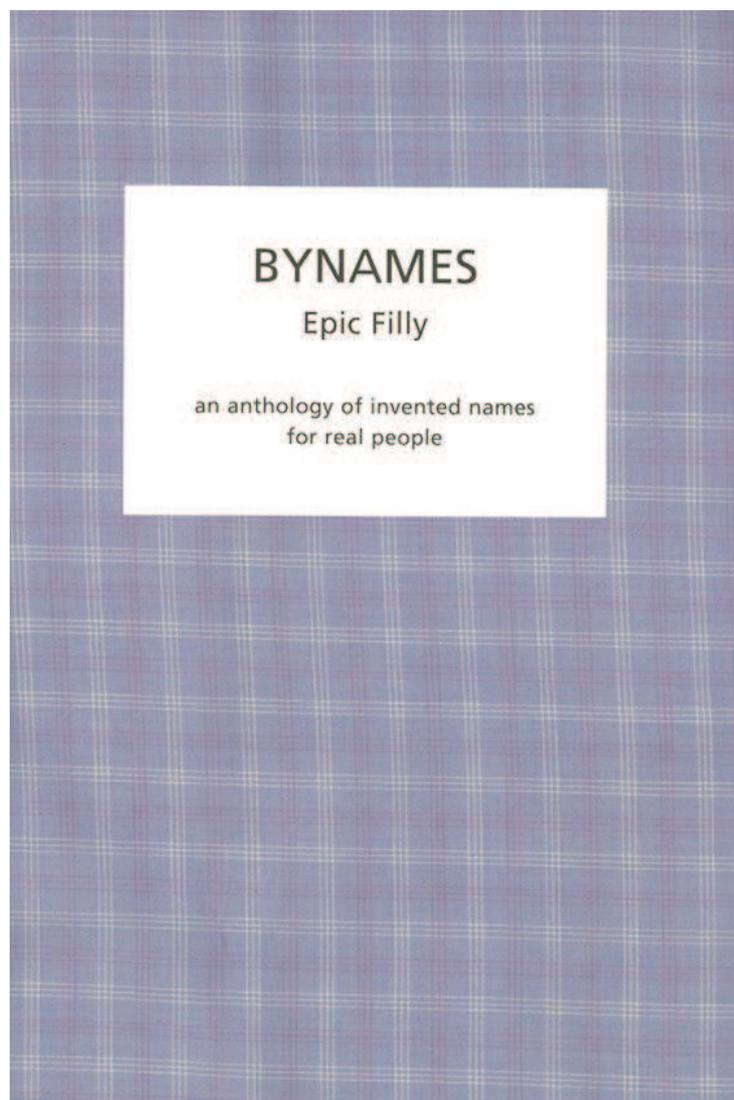


Figure 2. *Bynames : an anthology of invented names for real people* / Elect Finely [Alec Finlay].
© Alec Finlay

The artist's name may be in the form of a signature or initials. The signature may be legible, in which case there is no problem, however the signature or initials may be difficult to read or illegible. Or the artist's name may be absent all together. The absence or illegibility of the artist's name is significant, as it denies the ability to assign responsibility, hinders access and hampers the ability to research the book. Also many collections are filed on the shelf by name of artist.

The title may throw up an equal number of problems. Firstly, if there is a title page, its design or layout – for example, with overprinting, or consisting of several pages – may make the identification of the title difficult. Sometimes the title or part of the title may be represented by something other than words. Thomas A. Clark's 2017 publication of a poem printed on a folded sheet in a green cover has no obvious title but on the front cover there is the small drawing of a flower by Laurie Clark. The flower is a tufted saxifrage and this is the title of the book.

The artist may provide a title but this may also prove problematic for some reason. Natalie Yixi titled one of her works ' ' creating searching and filing problems. One possibility is to supply supplementary title information. Most leaves of Yixi's book bear a right justified phrase that consists of a given name and stating a cause of death. Hence a title might be ' ' : *[Martin died of liver cancer]* with the supplied sub-title being the first phrase in the book. The title that the artist wishes the work to be known as may not be the one that the book suggests. A work by Lynette Willoughby is made of brown paper bags (from fruit and vegetable stalls in Leeds Market) with shape of tree cut out of them. A gold leaf sheet has been placed inside the bag and shows through the cut-out tree shape. The bags are stitched into a brown card cover. The word "Tree" appears on the front cover of the book. This is the only text on the volume other than the artist's signature ("Lynette W."), the year and edition number, all handwritten on the inside back cover. One might assume that "Tree" is the title, however the title supplied by the artist and on a slip of paper accompanying the work is *Paper bag tree book*.

The title may simply be absent from the work, in which case the title can be taken from elsewhere. This can be accompanying material such as invoices, receipts, catalogues, bibliographies, price lists or the artist's website.

When the title is absent and no title can be found the cataloguer may be called upon to provide a title. Sometimes a title can be derived from the contents of the book. The title of George Cullen's work *Through defined depths* is taken from the first few words of the book (see Figure 3).

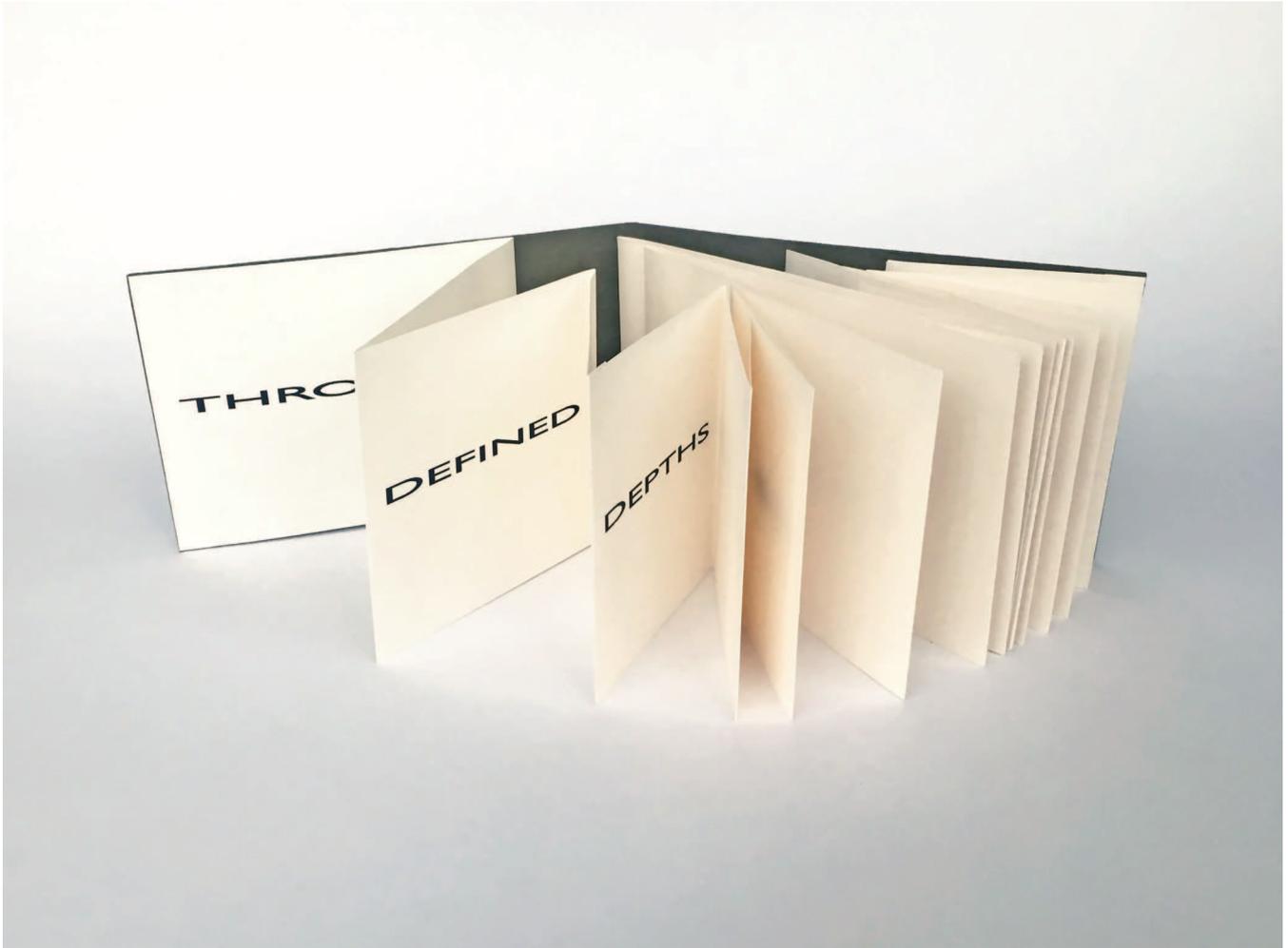


Figure 3. Through defined depths / George Cullen.
© George Cullen

The publisher can be a relatively mainstream publisher¹ or a specialist publisher, such as Book Works and Revolver. Otherwise the publisher is often the artist in some guise, for example Ensixteen Editions is the imprint of Mike Nicholson. If no publisher is stated on the book, then the artist can be assumed to be the publisher. The date of publication can be difficult to establish if not given on the book. But it can be useful in distinguishing between works where an artist has several works with the same or very similar titles.

The notes fields should be used extensively as they offer the cataloguer the opportunity to expand on other parts of the catalogue record and to provide information that it is not possible to enter elsewhere. A physical description of the work can be given detailing the book format (for example dos à dos, concertina, flutter book), materials (especially if something other than paper is used) and techniques (such as printing process). The content of the book can be described but care should be taken not to interpret the work. The cataloguer should not tell the reader what to think about the work. It is for the reader, perhaps with guidance through artists' statements, to understand the book in their own way. One of the greatest challenges for the cataloguer is to provide the reader with adequate information to access the book but still allow the reader to come to the work anew, fresh.

¹ For example, ActesSud publishes artists' books by Sophie Calle including *Voir la mer* and *Take care of yourself*.

There are sources of assistance to the cataloguer. Published works about artists' books, including monographs and exhibition catalogues, can provide invaluable information. But these often cover established artists, and non-specialist libraries may not acquire background materials in depth. Histories, by their definition, tend to look back. One publication that is very contemporary and also offers opportunities to all book artists is *Artist's book yearbook*.² It is a biennial publication that offers artists the chance to provide details about 3 works published since the previous edition.

However, the internet is the obvious source of information and the first port of call. Publishers' websites can give full information: for example, Book Works's website gives artist(s) name, title, whether published in association with another organisation, date of publication, number of pages, designer's name and a description of the work. Booksellers too can have full records. Printed Matter records can include artist(s) name, place of publication, publisher, date of publication, pagination, dimensions, binding type and edition size. The Printed Matter website also includes information for out of stock (often older) material.

Artists' websites are potentially a rich source of information. While some artists' websites provide little information, perhaps having just a title and a photograph, other artists have very full websites giving title, date of publication, edition size, technique, paper type, binding style and description. Some websites are kept up to date, adding new titles as they are made and published, while others have fallen into disuse, but these can still provide information about older titles. However, many back catalogues (works published prior to the website construction) have not been added to websites.

Artists' books can be purchased in many ways – through specialist book shops, booksellers and dealers, from publishers, through the internet, directly from the artist and at fairs. The acquisition librarian should be encouraged to collect and keep any accompanying material including receipts with the book for the cataloguer to see. If the acquisition librarian meets the artist they can request supporting information such as artists' statements and permission to approach the artist for further information. Then the acquisition librarian or cataloguer can request information such as omitted bibliographic details, printing technique, type and weight of paper, other materials and the concept behind the work. Any statements quoted in the catalogue record should be credited.

Finally, of course the artist's book may have already been catalogued by another library. Libraries, such as the National Art Library, Tate Library and Archive, University of the Arts London Libraries, MoMA Library and New York Public Library, have large collections of artists' books. Most libraries will have online catalogues and may contribute to databases such as Worldcat. Libraries who are not members of these databases should not take records without permission. But looking at another library's record may be a help or pointer.

Sometimes when information is absent it simply comes down to knowledge and experience of the cataloguer to provide missing information. For example, the only text on a work consisting of three concertina printed cards, cut and folded held within a half width case, is semi-legible initials and the number of the edition. The initials are a squiggle which can be read as "13" or "IB" or "LB". Another work consisting of 5 pieces of cut and folded white paper with words printed in blue bears no name or title. But due to elements of these books resembling other works it can be ascertained that they are both by Les Bicknell.

Artists' books are exciting and stimulating for both the reader and cataloguer. They require full and detailed cataloguing to allow them to be fully accessible. This may require outside resources to be investigated and/or the artist consulted.

² Latest edition: Bodman, Sarah (editor) (2017). *Artist's Book Yearbook 2018-2019*. Impact Press.

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