

A kind of a 'Huh?' A conversation about artists' publications

Nico Dockx, Johan Pas AND Gustavo Grandal Montero

At the request of the Middelheim Museum, artist Nico Dockx and art historian Johan Pas, from the ArchiVolt research group of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, undertook a survey of the museum's library collection. Between March 2022 and December 2023, they examined the phenomenon of artists' publications from a range of perspectives, through a series of conversations with artists, designers, publishers and collectors, a symposium, and the book *A kind of a 'Huh?' Artists' publications: (Not) a user's manual*. We discussed these and other related projects with them.

Art Libraries Journal (ALJ): *Sharing your knowledge and expertise is central to these interrelated projects. Could you tell us about your backgrounds and your involvement with artists' publications?*

Johan Pas (JP): Well, as an art historian deeply involved with the avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s, I of course came in touch with artists' books, artists' pages, and artists' magazines. Apart from that, I've been in love with print and books since I was a kid and tended to collect a lot of stuff. Since the late 1990s I've been directing my collection towards avant-garde and artists' publications, basically from the 1880s to today, but with a strong focus on neo-avant-garde and conceptualist movements. My collection, that I labeled CRAP (Collection for Research on Artists' Publications) functions as a toolbox for my writing, my curating, and my teaching on the subject. Many exhibitions and articles have come out of it, as well as two books, the last of which is *Artists' Publications: The Belgian Contribution* (Koenig Books, 2017).

Nico Dockx (ND): I have been making printed matter since my teenage years in the late 80s, being part of a skateboarding community, underground music scene (punk, hardcore, hip-hop) and squatter's movement... in which self-published fanzines, posters and records were strongly embedded as part of a DIY philosophy of doing things. After chemistry studies at the university, I ended up in the art academy studying printmaking (and later also video and film), picking up this notion of publishing. Since 2000 I have been producing and distributing more than 200 publications and other printed matter, intensively thinking and re-thinking about the how, what, where and when of sharing information and giving meaning to it. Printing and publishing as a permanent process of artistic collaboration and exchange with creative persons from many different fields: art, science, architecture, poetry, cinema, theater, economy, philosophy, economy, food...

ALJ: *When did you start collaborating? Can you tell us about the ArchiVolt research group of the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts?*

JP: ArchiVolt was founded some fifteen years ago as the first research group at the Antwerp Academy. From the beginning it focused on research and projects aiming at activating the archive, from an artistic as well as curatorial point of view. At this moment, Nico is leading the group, and I perform my research under its umbrella.



Image 1. Artists' publications at the Middelheim Museum.

ALJ: *What was the genesis of this particular project? How did you get involved in a review of a library collection, what were its aims and the context for it?*

JP: The project was initiated by the Middelheim museum and its staff.¹ They were struggling a bit with the 'hidden' collection of artists' publications, in which they saw a rich potential for displaying and connecting with their more traditional collection of modern and contemporary sculpture. They wanted to identify, label, and provide digital access to the artists' books in their library collection as to make the audience aware of its meaning and potential. So there was a technical and a bibliographical aspect, as well as an artistic and art historical one. For the latter Nico and me, as members of the ArchiVolt research group of the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts, were invited to scan the library collection for the artists' publications and develop a tool for identifying and organising them. Which we did, by physically checking every book and catalogue in the collection, which was an inspiring but, in the heat of the summer, a sweaty and dusty enterprise... However, we managed to select some 1700 titles which we labeled artists' books, artists' catalogues, and artists' magazines. Regarding artists' pages and artists' ephemera, we limited ourselves to a few case studies in order to set out a framework for the librarians to do further research into the collection.

1. <https://middelheimmuseum.be/en/page/kind-huh>

ALJ: *What was different about this project? How does it relate to other cataloguing projects, in museum and/or library settings, as well as to other initiatives focused on public presentation and discussion of artists' publications?*

ND: I have been experimenting with cataloguing systems for more than 20 years as part of my practice as an artist and in close relation to my own personal library and archive as well as the archives of people like Marcel Broodthaers, Lygia Clark, René Heyvaert, Louwrien Wijers, Chris Dercon, Yona Friedman, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Livinus van de Bundt... I am fascinated by how information gets catalogued and processed, and I like to intervene as an artist in these existing, institutional ordering systems and frameworks to see if one could make it more elastic and plastic, expanding the possibilities of interpretation.

JP: To be honest, I did not really investigate earlier cataloguing projects, although I did more or less the same job a few years ago for the Antwerp M HKA (Museum of Contemporary Art) collection. So I already had it a little bit in my fingers... We worked separately on the shelves, I starting with A and Nico with Z, and moving towards each other. We did not really agree upon fixed criteria but



Image 2. Poster of symposium, 23 November 2023.

managed to agree on the outcome. Basically, we considered the artists' authorship as a primary and key indicator, together with artists' being involved in the editing and designing of the publication.

ALJ: What was the role of the public talks? Could you give an overview of the five talks and the symposium, and how and why you decided to organize them?

ND: The primary role of the different public talks and presentations which we organized in the Academy was to confront the students with a diversity of publishing practices, and especially the notion of publishing as an art practice.

JP: With the talks we wanted to open the discussion and share our experiences with invited guests and the audience. By organizing the talks in the Academy art students could also be involved easily. We curated the talks thematically, by focusing each time on a certain aspect of artists' publications, like the defining, the collecting, the publishing, and the designing of artists' publications. We invited people of our personal networks of which we knew that they had something to express or share about these aspects. The final symposium took a full day and wrapped up the whole project. For this grand finale we invited some international guests, mainly librarians and archivists of art institutions to present their view. The library and collection staff of the Middelheim museum also presented the concrete outcomes of the research project and their plans for their implementation. Finally, we also launched the first volume of *A kind of a 'Huh?'*.

ALJ: A kind of a 'Huh?' Artists' publications: (Not) a user's manual² is both a record of the project and a (not) manual with an emphasis on providing practical advice on recognizing and understanding artists' publications. The book also provides an extensive and up to date bibliography for those interested in delving deeper into the subject. You explicitly avoid engaging with theoretical discourses, why?

2. Ed. Note: Publication of the research project *Artists' Publications. Digital registration and accessibility of publications about/with/by artists in the Library of the Middelheim Museum* (March 2022-December 2023) by the Middelheim Museum in collaboration with research group ArchiVolt of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp. Text: Johan Pas. Graphic design: Nico Dockx, Wouter Van der Wangen.

Reviewed by Elizabeth James on this issue, p. xx.



Image 3. Cover, *A kind of a 'Huh?' Artists' publications: (Not) a user's manual*.

JP: I felt that a lot of energy had been invested in the formalist debates about the definition of artists' books. Of course, as an art historian I find these enormously interesting, but I also noticed that theoretical discussions on definitions were mainly the result of an artistic and theoretical *Zeitgeist*. So in the book we referred to that aspect but we focused on it being a tool for professionals and enthusiasts who need something to hold on to when getting involved with this hybrid and complicated genre of publications. That is why the book is structured like a manual or school textbook and written in clear language (Dutch as well as English). A second volume will assemble contributions by all the guests of the lectures and the symposium, and will be much more like a reader or an anthology.

ND: And, in this forthcoming reader, there will be many artists' contributions specifically made for this publication.

ALJ: You offer a succinct definition of the field: 'artists' publications are publications by artists (...) In artists' publications, the artist is not (only) the subject, but (also) the author', and identify seven main types: artists' books, artists' catalogues, artists' magazines, artists' pages (or inserts), artists' ephemera, audiovisual artists' publications, and multiples. You offer a range of examples for each of these, many with images. How did you come to the selection, and what was the criteria for inclusion?

JP: The examples are what they are, examples to illustrate the definition and the types of artists' publications. The selection was based upon titles represented in the Middelheim library (as well as in mine, which helped with the writing of the book). It aimed at some representativity, connecting publications of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as more contemporary ones.

ALJ: In your conclusions, you stress the importance of artists' publications and the need for institutions to include them in their collection, preservation, and

access policies. However, there isn't much discussion of the professional literature in museology or librarianship, and you make only a few general recommendations, for instance, that it is appropriate to keep [artists' publications] in the library and/or archive, but that should also be given a digital label that makes explicit their status as artist's publications. Could you expand on what you would consider good (or bad) practice for museum and library professionals, and how would you like to see these materials presented in an online context?

JP: Totally true. The goal of our book is to present guidelines in identifying and describing artists' publications, and to stimulate an awareness about the importance as well as the complexity of the genre. Nico's background being that of an artist-publisher, and mine being that of an art historian-collector, we did not really aim at museological and librarian practices. In the discussions of the peer group of librarians during the research project, however, a lot of input was provided and expertise shared. These recommendations and interactions were incorporated into the report of the Middelheim staff Veerle Meul and Sara Clissen about the project, and will be shared in the forthcoming publication.

ALJ: This project is an exemplar of meaningful and thoughtful collaboration between library and museum professionals, artists, and academics, but also between different institutions. What advice would you give to librarians considering working with artists and academics around artists' publications, and, more generally, how can we foster more productive sharing between local institutions?

ND: Related to what advice could be given to librarians considering working together with artists around artists' publications: be open to any possible proposal being made, give one another confidence and trust, always resist existing and scripted frameworks so that new connections and interpretations can be made as any form of information is organic and alive. Archives are a living entity with many different sorts of metabolism. How to foster more productive sharing between institutions... well, think and do things in a co-creative way going beyond individual and institutional positions of property and power (control). We cannot not collaborate as everything touches upon everything.

JP: I guess the main challenge is to provide access and visibility to artists' publications without formatting or framing them too much. The moment you pin them down following formal or conceptual criteria, they are domesticated, which I feel is against the very notion of artistic publishing. So, there is a slight contradiction and even a friction in trying to bring them more within the structures of organizations, and of guaranteeing them their unpredictability. Let us allow that friction to exist...

ALJ: Finally, tell us about your current work and any future plans related to artists' publications.

ND: Currently, I am simultaneously working on very different printed matter. I just finished a publication on the Pirate Pavilion program that I developed last summer in Park Baron Casier in Waregem with contributions by Dan Perjovschi, George Rosu, Dennis Tyfus, Seppe Nobels and Instroom Academy, Chris Dercon, Louwrien Wijers and many others. I am also in the final stages of a book on 20 years practice titled *Ouragan Opera* which deals with the diversity of printed matter and archives in my work. Related to books and publications there are always many future plans and especially dreams that perhaps never get realized like for example this idea of printing/ publishing a book a day!

JP: I am further developing my CRAP collection in order to make it a powerful tool for producing and sharing knowledge on artists' publications. By connecting early 20th century avant-garde publications with later releases, continuities and disruptions occur. I also feel that the field of artists' ephemera (invitation cards, postcards, etc.) is becoming more and more important. After the artist as a curator, as an educator, as a publisher, the artist as a communicator opens up as a fascinating field of research. For the moment I am reconsidering my classes 'Paper Events: Artists' Publications as Alternative Spaces', and preparing two small exhibitions for the Academy: one on the printed matter of Belgian artist Jef

Geys, and one on Surrealist books, catalogues and magazines to celebrate and debate a century of Surrealism. I plan to title it 'Subversive Pages'...

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