

## HELEN COLE

### Public collections of artists' books in Australia

Artists' books<sup>1</sup> have a low profile in the wider art community in Australia. Gallerist Noreen Grahame, speaking at the State Library of Queensland in 2013, stated that 'as far as private collections go, there are two "private collections" I know of'.<sup>2</sup> This may be because artists' books cannot be displayed like cultural trophies on a wall, or perhaps it's just that collectors of art are unaware of them. Grahame went on to note that although artists' books are currently popular with artists, 'most do not find a home'.<sup>3</sup> Those that do find a home must of necessity find it in a public collection. With little support from the commercial gallery sector, it is also left to public collections to promote discourse on artists' books (this special issue of the *La Trobe Journal* being an example) and to make them available for viewing through exhibitions, online and other means.

My observations regarding public collections of artists' books are based on a survey circulated to curators of Australian collections. While most Australian galleries and libraries include (some unknowingly) artists' books in their collections, only a limited number regard their artists' books as an important part of their collections or view and treat them as separate collections. Due to the problems of definition and the difficulty of identifying artists' books within large databases, with sometimes inconsistent records, most

Kelvyn Cunningham, *The Historio-pictographic Disc Fragments*, 2013. Winner of the Regional Artists Book Award, Libris Awards 2013. Mackay Regional Council Collection, Artspace Mackay

Robert Rauschenberg  
 1965-1966, 1967  
 The Rauschenberg Foundation  
 100% cotton, 100% polyester  
 100% cotton, 100% polyester  
 100% cotton, 100% polyester  
 100% cotton, 100% polyester



institutions are unable to be specific about the number of works they hold. Generally, however, the collections can be classified as large (more than 1000 works), medium (250–999 works) or small (30–249 works). Institutions like the Australian War Memorial have small holdings relating to their other art collections, and some teaching institutions have small collections for student use. The 2014 exhibition *Artist's Books (Reprised)*<sup>4</sup> displayed the University of Melbourne Archives' interesting collection of artists' books that was originally assembled for exhibitions in 1978 and 1982.<sup>5</sup> There may be other small public collections that have yet to be discovered or revealed.

#### Australian public collections of artists' books

| COLLECTION<br>START DATE<br>(APPROX.) | COLLECTION NAME                                                                  | CATALOGUE URL                                  |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Large collections</b>              |                                                                                  |                                                |
| 1972                                  | National Gallery of Australia                                                    | artsearch.nga.gov.au                           |
| 1988                                  | State Library of Queensland                                                      | oneresearch.slq.qld.gov.au                     |
| 1989                                  | State Library of Victoria                                                        | www.slv.vic.gov.au                             |
| <b>Medium collections</b>             |                                                                                  |                                                |
| 1989                                  | Artspace Mackay                                                                  | Not available online                           |
| 1980                                  | State Library of New South Wales                                                 | library.sl.nsw.gov.au/search                   |
| 1990                                  | Rare Books, Matheson Library                                                     |                                                |
|                                       | Monash University, Clayton Campus                                                | monash.edu/library                             |
| 2004                                  | Monash Art, Design, Architecture Library,<br>Monash University, Caulfield Campus | monash.edu/library                             |
| 2000                                  | Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne                                        | cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au                         |
| 1990                                  | National Library of Australia                                                    | catalogue.nla.gov.au                           |
| 1975                                  | Australian Experimental Art Foundation                                           | Not available online                           |
| 1990                                  | Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library                                  | library.ag.nsw.gov.au                          |
| <b>Small collections</b>              |                                                                                  |                                                |
| 1998                                  | Southern Cross University Library                                                | scu.edu.au/library                             |
| 1990                                  | Deakin University Art Collection                                                 | Not available online                           |
| 2004                                  | Fryer Library, University of Queensland                                          | www.library.uq.edu.au                          |
| 2010                                  | Manly Library                                                                    | www.manly.nsw.gov.au<br>(digitised books only) |

Discrete public collections of artists' books in Australia have a relatively recent history, as does the creation and documentation of artists' books in this country. Most public collections of artists' books began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The exceptions to this are the Australian Experimental Art Foundation and the National Gallery of Australia that, consequently, have

collections that are stronger in early Australian output than the others, while also being more representative of overseas trends in artists' books.

The first and, for many years, only book published on Australian artists' books, Gary Catalano's *The Bandaged Image: A Study of Australian Artists' Books* (1983),<sup>6</sup> discussed books created between 1956 and 1982. This roughly coincides with the formation of the earliest collection of Australian artists' books, that of the Experimental Art Foundation (now the Australian Experimental Art Foundation) in Adelaide.

It reflects the period of the sixties & early '70s avant-garde & its interest in the artist's book as a medium. It reflects the connectedness the first EAF director, Noel Sheridan, shared with leading artists around the world. He was one of them, knew them, had worked with many of them overseas, corresponded with them. And he was 'of' the post-object & conceptualist scene in Australia & so connected to the Australian counterparts of those overseas groupings ... The collection was mostly donated via artists as a means of communication between themselves & Sheridan personally or with the community of like-minded artists he represented. It features work by the international & Australian international artists of the period.<sup>7</sup>

This situation no longer exists and additions to the collection consist of limited donations and the foundation's publications. The collection is a remarkable time capsule of works of the period, but is minimally catalogued, unorganised and available for viewing by appointment only.

In 1980 Noel Sheridan also donated a collection of more than 100 works to the National Gallery of Australia that was subsequently divided between the International and Australian collections. This was followed by a commitment from the National Gallery to collect the ephemeral art of the time: mail art, postcards, stamp art and artists' books, all of which are now part of the Australian Book Arts collection along with comics, manifestos, illustrated books and zines. The International collection began with the acquisition of the Felix Mann Collection in 1972, which included around 100 books. The International collection is now rich in the highlights of international book design, such as Henri Matisse's *Jazz* (1947) and Joan Miró's *A toute épreuve* (1958). In addition to funds from the gallery's general acquisitions budget, extra funds are available for the Prints and Drawings collections to include artists' books, from the Orde Poynton Fund for international works and the Gordon Darling Australia Pacific Print Fund for contemporary Australian works.

Apart from these two collections, most Australian institutions concentrate on Australian works or those made within their home state, with

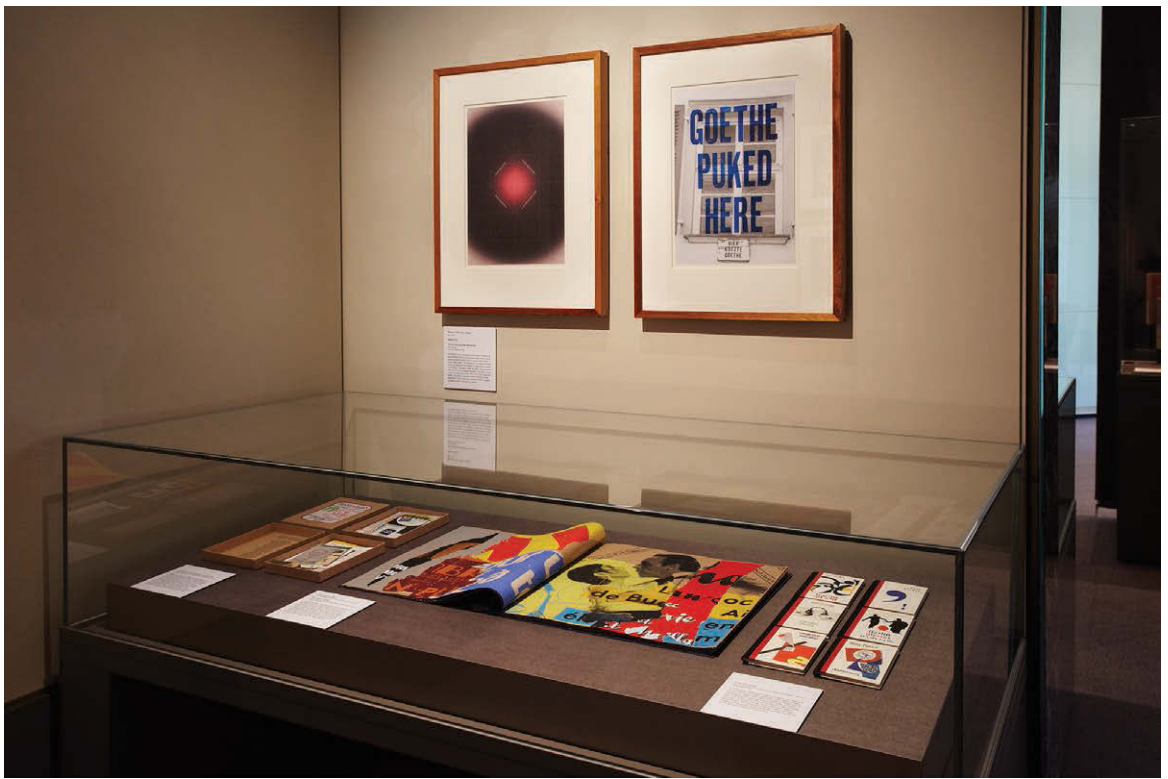
selective acquisitions of international works. One exception to this is the Nigel Greenwood Collection held by the State Library of Queensland. This collection of 214 conceptual works by English, American and European artists from the 1970s through to the early 1990s was the private and working collection of gallerist and publisher Nigel Greenwood. It was acquired following the closure of his London gallery in 1992.

Public artists' books collections are divided between art galleries and public libraries. The difference between them relates to the collecting ethos of each type of institution. While public art galleries have a selective curatorial focus, the ethic of a library collection is to make knowledge available to its public. This translates into libraries having much broader collections. As they are more easily accessible to the public and had an earlier uptake of the internet as a platform to make their catalogues widely available, it has also meant that libraries have become the major means through which viewers can have a close encounter with artists' books.

The 1960s concept of the artists' book as a 'democratic multiple' – works which were small, cheap and could be distributed easily outside the gallery system – should have appealed to the democratic ethos of the library. Except for the occasional isolated, and probably accidental copy, however, they were not collected by libraries during this period because of their absence from the normal library distribution channels. Ironically, these initially cheap and plentiful works have gone the way of much ephemeral material and libraries, trying to retrospectively address these lacunae in their collections, now purchase them at high prices from the secondary market.<sup>8</sup>

It could be assumed that libraries have a natural advantage over galleries in collecting artists' books because of legal deposit requirements. Under the various copyright and libraries Acts,<sup>9</sup> publishers are obliged to deposit a copy of every work printed in this country with the National Library of Australia and the relevant state or territory library, except in the Australian Capital Territory. In effect, however, these libraries generally make allowances for limited editions and expensive works and do not insist on their deposit. Consequently, legal deposit has little effect on collecting artists' books. While the national and state libraries aim at comprehensive collections of the published output within their geographic area, no collection could cope with the large number of artists' books that are produced annually. Nor does it need to, given that many artists' books are not formally published.

There appears to be a disconnect between art museums and artists' books as an art form. With the exception of the National Gallery of Australia, which has an important and extensive collection, the major galleries only



Display of artists' books in *Mirror of the World: Books and Ideas*, State Library of Victoria, 2013

collect the book works of high-profile national and international artists. The bulk of their artists' books collection, if they have one, will be held by the library, as is the case with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for example. This follows international practice, for example, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library decided around 1990 that, due to their rarity, the artists' books that had made their way into the library's collection should be treated separately. The gallery's library regularly displays artists' books in its exhibition cabinets, but items from this collection have never been shown in an Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition.

Apart from the National Gallery of Australia, the major galleries do not generally include artists' books in their curatorial collection policies. Their collections are described as 'illustrated books' rather than 'artists' books', encompassing anything in codex form from medieval manuscripts to contemporary artists' books. Artists' books are usually collected by departments of prints and drawings.

As the state libraries began collecting artists' books, the state galleries essentially left them to it. The State Library of Victoria began to collect

artists' books when it was advised by an artist that his books had been rejected previously by the Library as they were art and by the National Gallery of Victoria as they were books. No one was collecting artists' books and, while at that point they were not mentioned in the Library's collection policy, the works complied with the policy for private press and limited editions. While the National Gallery of Victoria has a substantial collection of illustrated books, it does not systematically collect contemporary artists' books. The State Library of Queensland began collecting artists' books due to the focus on Australian arts in the collection that was established by the donation of the James Hardie Library of Australian Fine Arts in 1988. The Queensland Art Gallery has, therefore, not pursued artists' books for its collection except in cases where they support other parts of the collection; for example, Judith Wright's extremely large-format books that are part of her installations.

As artworks in the form of books, artists' books should have one foot firmly in each camp (libraries and art galleries). Yet, only libraries have embraced the artists' book unreservedly as part of their collections and have successfully provided the intimate access that artists' books require for full engagement, even though the housing, storage, preservation and access challenges these books present would be more easily resolved by gallery infrastructure. These problems have, however, generally precluded public (that is, local council) libraries from collecting artists' books. Exceptions to this are Mackay City Library (Queensland) and Manly Library (New South Wales).

The Mackay City Library collection grew from a group of book-related artworks – John Gould prints and original artwork for book jackets. Following the establishment of a regional gallery (Artspace Mackay) the collection was transferred to it in 2002. This process was supported by a significant gift of books, prints and woodblocks by Townsville-based artist Tate Adams when the gallery opened in 2003. For several years Artspace Mackay became the hub of artists' book discourse in Australia, presenting national conferences in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2010 with associated masterclasses and artists' talks. Artspace Mackay was instrumental in bringing international practitioners to Australia and fostering continuing international connections. It instituted the first National Artists' Book Award in 2006, which has since been awarded in 2008, 2010 and 2013. Prizes are offered in open, regional, and emerging artist categories and acquisitions from the award, in addition to the gallery's annual budget, effectively continue to develop the collection.

The most recently established collection, Manly Library, received a grant of \$15,000 in 2010 from the Library Council of New South Wales to begin a collection of artists' books and zines. It was thought that there were few

accessible collections of artists' books in New South Wales and that a public library collection would be a valuable resource. To build the collection, a biennial Artists' Book Award with international scope was instituted in 2011. This is now funded by the artists' entry fees to the award. There are no other purchases made for the collection, although donations are accepted.

Collections built from award acquisitions that are selected by different guest judges each time run the risk of having little cohesion. This method of acquisition also means that there is no retrospective collecting, so the collection will not present a historical context for the works. Without a guiding idea of the focus of the collection and the relationship of the books to each other, the collection may become no greater than the sum of its parts.

The Southern Cross University collection (in Lismore, New South Wales), begun in 1998 to support students in the visual arts program, has also grown in part due to the introduction of an acquisitive award. Inaugurated in 2005, the award was also offered in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2011, with award funds (\$2000 in 2005 rising to \$3000 in 2008 and \$4000 in 2011) used to purchase the works chosen by the judge for the collection. In 2008 and 2009 the award exhibition was held at Barratt Galleries in nearby Alstonville, while all other exhibitions were held at the university's Next Gallery either on campus or in Lismore town centre.

Collections such as those of the Southern Cross and Monash (Caulfield) universities – created by libraries at tertiary institutions as a teaching resource for students and as a repository for student work – are a development of the last 15 years. This period has seen a surge in the teaching of artists' book courses in art colleges. These programs were often dependent upon the work of individual practitioners within these institutions, with teachers such as Jan Davis at Southern Cross University, Ron McBurnie at James Cook University and Dianne Fogwell at the Australian National University supporting the development of regional communities of artists' books makers in their locale. These collections, held by both university and TAFE colleges, have a tenuous existence, dependent upon the vagaries of institutional support for the subject areas they cover. The current situation in the education sector, with many arts faculties being dismantled or radically changed, will lead to the dissolution of these collections. At the time of writing, the Southern Cross University collection has no funding for either its award or further acquisitions.

Uniquely, Deakin University has established an artists' books collection as part of the university art collection rather than in its library. Without a direct connection to curriculum and as part of a broader collection, it may have a better chance than other tertiary education collections of a continuing

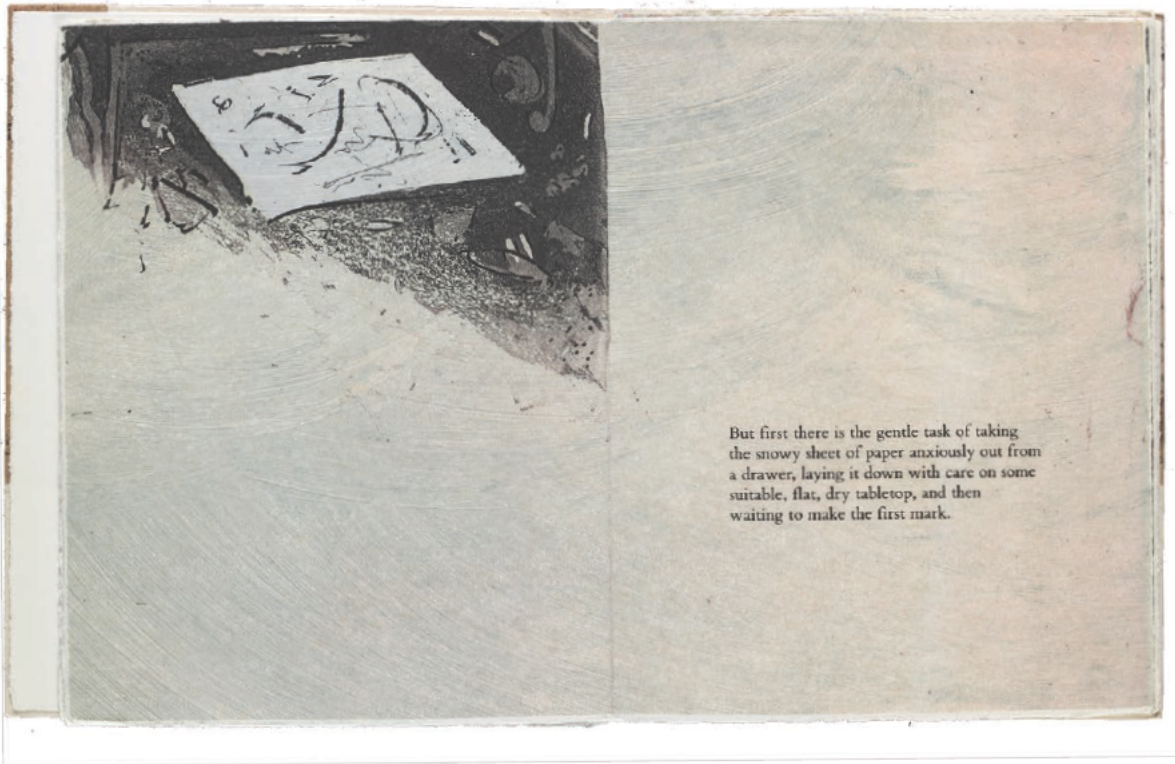
existence. Regular artists' books exhibitions are a feature of the Deakin University Art Gallery program.

Within non-academic libraries, different approaches and purposes for artists' books collections are evident. The State Library of New South Wales acquires artists' books on the basis of documentary content and how they fit in with and support the rest of the collection on a subject basis. They are catalogued and shelved within the State Library's other collections rather than as a distinct group. In the National Library of Australia, artists' books fit within the printed Australian collections, but also complement other areas of the collection. Other libraries, including the State Library of Victoria, State Library of Queensland and Monash University (Clayton), collect artists' books for their own sake as documentation of the history of the book, as representations of art movements and to explore the development of the book as object.

All libraries, except Manly Library, catalogue their artists' books using the standardised library cataloguing protocols, often with extensive added descriptive notes regarding materials and concepts. Some libraries (for example State Library of Victoria and Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne) group artists' books together under the Dewey number for artists' books: 702.81. Others, such as the Fryer Library, University of Queensland; National Library of Australia; and State Library of New South Wales, spread them through their rare printed collections based on subject, while still others use in-house systems based on consecutive numbering (Southern Cross University) or alphabetic (State Library of Queensland) sequences. The artists' books holdings of most libraries are available through the National Library's Trove website<sup>10</sup> as well as through their own online catalogues.

Artists' books in art galleries' curatorial collections are catalogued (along with other formats) on collection management databases. The Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Artspace Mackay and Deakin University Art Collection catalogues are not available online. The National Gallery of Australia catalogue is available online and searches can be narrowed to artists' books or illustrated books.

The collection of Manly Library is not catalogued, although the books are gradually being digitised and made available online. While several libraries have digitised images of artists' books for the purposes of exhibition and publications, the only other library digitising complete artists' books is the State Library of Queensland, which has digitised 60 works. Digital files of each page of these books are attached to their catalogue records. At a time of mass digitisation of library collections, priorities for digitisation are placed



But first there is the gentle task of taking the snowy sheet of paper anxiously out from a drawer, laying it down with care on some suitable, flat, dry tabletop, and then waiting to make the first mark.

Bruno Leti and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *Drawing*, Melbourne, Centre for the Development of Artists' Books, 1994

on material with the widest possible interest – usually historical collections – with the result that artists' books are generally not chosen for reproduction. A further disincentive to digitising artists' books is the need to negotiate copyright agreements with the artists; for collaborative artists' books this process may involve five or more creators for each work. The National Gallery of Australia is gradually digitising its book holdings and these are available through their catalogue. Some works are wholly digitised, while others are done selectively.

Acquisitions of artists' books are most often made by direct contact with the artists themselves; nonetheless purchases from galleries and the secondary market are also important. The State Library of Queensland is currently the only institution that has a separate budget for artists' books. Other libraries acquire artists' books through their rare books budget, while galleries purchase through their general acquisitions budget.

A noteworthy difference between artists' books and other art forms is their market. As previously mentioned, whereas works such as paintings have a large pool of private collectors, artists' books rely substantially on the institutional market. While some artists are successful in placing some of their works in international collections, Australian artists must market to the dozen or so Australian institutions that are actively purchasing. For even a small edition of

ten copies of a book, most institutions would need to buy a copy to make the exercise valid for the artist. One effect of this is that many of the collections contain the same works. For example, most will include works by artists such as Lyn Ashby, Angela Cavalieri, Dianne Fogwell, Petr Herel, Bruno Leti, Dianne Longley, Peter Lyssiotis and Milan Milojevic. Each curator will pursue what they consider to be the best books for their collection and their public; it is inevitable that the same books will appear in multiple collections and this is critical to the sustainability of artists' book practice. For example Ashby's *Sisyphus Goes Home* (2006), a visual interpretation of the Greek myth about the man who is condemned to push a rock up a mountain every day, is held by the National Gallery of Australia; Monash University (Clayton); Southern Cross University; State Library of Victoria; Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne; State Library of Queensland and Art Gallery of New South Wales. Peter Lyssiotis's and Noga Freiberg's *Homeland* (2003), which explores the green lines that divide their home countries of Cyprus and Israel, is held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales; Artspace Mackay; Monash University (Clayton); Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne; National Library of Australia; State Library of New South Wales; State Library of Queensland; State Library of Victoria; and National Gallery of Australia. *Drawing* (1994), with etchings by Bruno Leti and poetry by Chris Wallace-Crabbe, is held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales; Monash University (Clayton); State Library of New South Wales; State Library of Victoria; Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne; and State Library of Queensland. In this regard, however, artists' books are no different from other art forms in galleries – if not the same editioned works, then similar works by the same artists will be included in many public collections.

Prices for artists' books have increased as the institutional market has broadened and collections have become established with ongoing budgets. Now, however, these budgets are under threat from the increasing costs of digital content in other library collection areas. While libraries do not see themselves as arbiters of taste, inevitably (as the primary purchasers) they are seen in that role, creating the difference between well-known and lesser known book artists (though even the well-known are often not known by the general art community). This further affects the market, with some artists able to demand higher prices. A rise in prices can also be explained in part by the higher production values of the books themselves. While institutions have contributed to the increase in prices, they are now the victims of such an increase as their budgets decrease in real terms and they are unable to

purchase as many works each year. Some institutions limit their purchase of artists' books to the lower end of the market; for example, the Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library has a \$1000 limit for individual works and Monash University (Caulfield) has also introduced a price limit due to budget constraints.

All collections rely to some extent on donations. The option of the Commonwealth Government Cultural Gifts Program is available to accredited institutions; however, the value of artists' books – relatively low in the scheme of art market prices – and the usually low income of their makers mean that donations under the program are often not feasible for either the institution or the donor. For higher value books, however, this is a useful avenue for acquisition.

With the exception of a few Australian commercial galleries who exhibit artists' books from time to time and grahame galleries + editions in Brisbane, which has been instrumental in the dissemination of artists' books throughout Australia,<sup>11</sup> it is through public collections that artists' books are promoted and made available for viewing. The institutions that offer awards (Artspace Mackay, Manly Library and Southern Cross University), have exhibitions to showcase these awards. The larger institutions have not only presented exhibitions focused on artists' books,<sup>12</sup> but have also incorporated artists' books into exhibitions encompassing broader subjects; for example, the annually refreshed *Mirror of the World* exhibition at the State Library of Victoria. Most collections are also available to interest groups, such as tertiary students, for hands-on sessions led by staff. These ensure that artists' books are presented to a larger number of viewers than would otherwise be possible. Artists' books are usually the most highly used group of works of the collections of which they are part.

Public institutions, both collecting and non-collecting, have been responsible for ongoing discourse regarding artists' books. In addition to the forums presented by Artspace Mackay, seminars, lectures and workshops on artists' books have been offered by the State Library of Victoria; Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne; and State Library of Queensland, while the National Gallery of Australia has included artists' books in its regular print symposia. The State Library of Victoria included a week-long course on artists' books delivered by Professor Sasha Grishin in its 2012 Australian and New Zealand Rare Books Summer School. Noosa Regional Gallery, Queensland, while not a collecting institution, also presented annual artists' books seminars from 2004 to 2008. Similarly, East Gippsland Art Gallery

(Bairnsdale, Victoria) in 2009 instituted a non-acquisitive, biennial artists' book award and exhibition.

Fellowship programs have also contributed to the development of artists' books in Australia. The awarding of the 2001 National Gallery of Australia Gordon Darling Print Fellowship to Alex Selenitsch led to the publication by the gallery of Selenitsch's *Australian Artists Books*,<sup>13</sup> the first monograph on Australian artists' books since the 1983 Gary Catalano volume. Since 2003 the State Library of Victoria has awarded a number of Creative Fellowships to book artists. In 2014 the State Library of Queensland awarded the first of a series of Siganto Foundation Creative and Research Artists' Books Fellowships to Jan Davis and Doug Spowart. The Siganto Foundation has also supported lectures and workshops with international artists such as Keith Smith, Scott McCarney and Susan King.

The short history and gradual rise of the creation of artists' books in Australia has been mirrored by the growth of public collections. The number of collections grew as the number of artists making books increased. The early period of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s was captured at the time by only the Australian Experimental Art Foundation and the National Gallery of Australia. As the medium became more popular with artists, particularly printmakers, and other major galleries chose not to collect them, libraries realised the need to provide access to artists' books and effectively occupied the space. Further library collections were created as tertiary institutions began to include artists' books in their curricula and, consequently, began collections to support their students.

Public collections of contemporary artists' books in Australia are at a crossroads. In galleries (except the National Gallery of Australia, Artspace Mackay and Deakin University Art Collection) they are regarded as secondary works to other art forms. In academic libraries they face an uncertain future dependent on continued funding for arts faculties and courses. In other libraries they are part of printed collections that are having to fight for a place against the overwhelming tide of the digital. Without a culture of private collectors of artists' books in Australia, the future of artists' books seems grim. It is only by public support of these public collections that artists' books will continue to have a voice.<sup>14</sup>