

It Stares Us Down

---



# It Stares Us Down

---

*Nicola Dale in conversation with Michael Hampton*

Copyright © 2017 Nicola Dale & Michael Hampton

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the authors except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

No.    of 25

[www.nicoladale.com](http://www.nicoladale.com)  
[www.hamp09.wordpress.com](http://www.hamp09.wordpress.com)





## Preface

---

The following excerpts are taken from an extended online conversation (April-August 2016) between artist Nicola Dale and the writer/book artist Michael Hampton, part of her research for 'It Stares Us Down' – a series of new sculptural and performance works devised for the Wolfson Reading Room (formerly the Great Hall), Manchester Central Library.

'It Stares Us Down' (presented March 2017) is supported by Arts Council England, Manchester City Council, HOME and *a-n* The Artists Information Company.





## It Stares Us Down

---

**Michael Hampton:** Wouldn't my question about the sociological difference between readership and usership be a very good place to start?

**Nicola Dale:** "Usership", apart from having overtones of consumers / customers / service providers, seems to me an odd word to have superseded "readers", given that we are now living in some sort of permanent sea of reading. I know that's ignoring the effect of the internet on the traditional world of the library though, for if the internet renders life as "information" then small wonder that "user" replaces "reader". We use information, we don't read it as such do we?

I am keen to continue to use the word reader, partly out of stubbornness, but also because the idea of everything being just "information" seems to absolve us of any responsibility about what it is that we take in, where it comes from, how we manage it and where it goes. Thought about in this

context, "user" is not as active a term as it might first appear. We use the library, but the library must also "use" us to stay alive - as is pretty standard for all our institutions nowadays.

**MH:** In a recent email you alluded to a collection of lectures by Alberto Manguel, *The Traveller, The Tower, and The Worm: The Reader as Metaphor*, 2013. The book's dust jacket shows a neo-classical, dreamlike image of a traveller gingerly navigating his way across what appears to be a circular maze. Is there a connection in your mind between this scene and the beginnings of your project 'It Stares Us Down', intended to take place in the domed space of the Wolfson Reading Room at Manchester Central Library?

**ND:** There was no conscious connection between the two, but now that I look again, I can see clear links. I'd like to suggest that the structure shown in the illustration is a labyrinth rather than a maze. The Reading Room feels like a labyrinth to me. As well as being symmetrical, all its paths lead to the

centre. There are no dead ends. It was not set up to fool or baffle the reader; it was set up to help them.

The odd thing about the way the room works now of course is that when you reach its middle, there is only an unpopulated issue desk (the room is unstaffed), suggesting that today's visitor is going to have to help themselves. This makes me think about the ubiquity of laptops and tablets in the Reading Room (and everywhere else of course) that make ostensible "public" space feel ever more squeezed by a collision of worlds.

I feel some affinity with the figures "drowning" in the illustrated labyrinth. I am as overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Reading Room as I am by the sheer volume of reading material (textual and visual; physical and digital) out there in the library, never mind the world at large. However, in my role as artist, I'm afforded a different point of view: I can read the Reading Room itself. With this in mind I can relate to the figures that have

escaped up the walls of the labyrinth to get a clearer impression of its pattern.

In terms of thinking about changes to the act of reading, questions arise: *What kind of reading do I/we settle for? What kind of reading do I/we want to aim for? What kind of reader is the Reading Room for?*

The image sets out a clear hierarchy for its inhabitants. The sneaky traveller atop the centre of the labyrinth is physically linked to a being that operates at a higher level both physically (on the roof of a tower) and spiritually (this being has a halo and wings, so I think it's safe to assume it is divine!) A gilded biblical inscription (Proverbs 4:7) encircles the Reading Room's oculus:

*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her and she shall promote thee; she shall bring thee to honour when thou dost embrace her, she shall give of thine head an ornament of grace, a crown of glory she shall deliver to thee.*



Way up in the dome of the Reading Room, the oculus and its inscription are the winged figure's equivalent but how relevant are they to a modern reader? The oculus stares us down, challenges us to strive for knowledge, but we increasingly exist within a flat, screen-bound plane of information – the sense of hierarchy is different.

**MH:** The Wolfson Reading Room clearly has gripped your imagination, but it is hard to be sure if you visualise it as an allegorical space (which is strongly implied by the reference to a winged mythological figure or *genius loci*), or a largely pragmatic civic building?

The image of the issue desk being unpopulated is a slightly unnerving one, ghostly even, especially in today's business environment where service sector overkill is the norm in cafés, department stores, railway stations and airports. Perhaps there is a conceit at work here insofar as the reader or user is obliged to fend for themselves without angelic or daimonic intervention, or is it just a question of

financial shortfalls affecting staff levels?! After all most lending libraries have online catalogues and self check-out machines which reduce the workload of staff, a technological highway that is surely leading to the demise of professionally trained librarians, i.e. specialists with bibliographic know-how?

Many councils bewitched by the potential savings to be gained from reclassifying readers as “users”, are now looking to exploit this de-skilling by free-at-point-of-entry facilities, by encouraging volunteers to takeover and run branch libraries in particular, with a profitable gym and coffee franchise as a way of subsidising the traditional and therefore threatened functions of providing reading matter by Shakespeare, the Bronte sisters, Dickens (who gave a speech at the opening in 1852 of Manchester Free Library, later Manchester Central Library, fervently wishing that its books “will prove a source of pleasure in the cottages, the garrets, and the cellars of the poorest of our people”), Martin Amis or even Mills & Boon

fodder. To call this one symptom of a larger malaise that is affecting our publically funded facilities would be a truism, but libraries look like particularly soft targets (according to Tom Crewe's article *The Strange Death of Municipal England* 1 in 5 regional museums have shut since 2012, and library staff shrunk by 25%). Maybe they are doomed as public institutions? And in fact when you admit to being overwhelmed by the grandeur of Manchester Central Library you unwittingly summon up the title of a melancholic drawing by Henry Fuseli *The Artist Overwhelmed by the Magnitude of Antique Ruins*, 1778/79. Taking this trope further as you seem to want to do, the notion of the library as an artificial space, a hollowed out architectural container in which its oversized reference books exist only to provide a sort of window dressing, a 3-D gamer's definition is a terrifying one, because it begs the question: who owns knowledge? For in the succinct words of a song by the Manic Street Preachers "Libraries gave us power..." the past tense implying a certain nostalgia and anxiety about the erosion of



democratic lifestyle and town centre institutional fabric, all of this represented by the faux-romanesque cathedral of the Reading Room, in which light is only light (and therefore welcome), but no longer a religious metaphor.

**ND:** I am not exactly sure how I visualize the space either – a large chunk of both options - although the winged figure is from the Manguel book cover, rather than my own imagination/crazed eyesight.

The lack of staff in the Reading Room is certainly a sign of financial shortfall (to steal a great phrase from Will Self: “form follows finance”). It’s just that the lack is so strikingly embodied by that empty desk. Drawing attention to the empty space where people would have been is an impressive visual feat to have pulled off. Maybe it’s negative space in the unexpected sense?

Regarding the ownership of knowledge: at least in the grand days of the library institution you could see that knowledge was proudly (if patronisingly)



chosen/owned on behalf of “the public”. A sense of responsibility was literally written all over the walls. This is impossible in the online world.

**MH:** That's so Orwellian, i.e. the sinister sounding "provider" determining what the local population should and shouldn't read. It's a form of quasi-Victorian authoritarianism, because it means someone somewhere (unelected I guess) is vetting and procuring new books and making selections based on their own occluded set of criteria, doubtless cost driven before anything else, and so as you say the philanthropic altruism of Andrew Carnegie's era has been replaced with something much more ideologically suspect and dumbed down.

Of course there have always been audits, and professional librarians whose job it was to monitor statistically the regularity with which a particular book might be taken out in order to spot trends, and likewise there have always been withdrawn book sales, but when actual ISBN coded reading

matter is only one source of information/ amusement alongside the internet, e-books, cappuccino froth and running treadmills then it will be inevitable that the range of shelved texts available will literally be reduced to a few basic categories: a microlibrary of Fiction sub-divided into Classics, Large Print, Chicklit, Crime, ghostwritten Celebrity Autobiography and so on, backed up by an ever diminishing Reference section: de-skilling in matters of taste and also restricted or zero access to controversial or transgressive literature.

**ND:** I'm torn between it being sinister in an Orwellian sense or it being sinister in a Kafkaesque sense: bureaucracy overshadowing all else. The sub-division of printed fiction into categories such as Chicklit seems strangely at odds with the world of keywords and hashtags. If I need something specific online for example, I search for it with multiple words. If I were searching for Chicklit, I would be able to refine my search with multiple words. Then again, such a search does not

allow for an equivalent of the happy accidents discovered by browsing, as when the book that is sitting next to the book you first wanted all of a sudden seems much more interesting.

**MH:** But can we go back to the issue of “users” instead of “readers”? It's the sort of jargon that has crept into many walks of life since the mid 1990s, particularly the NHS. Maybe “readers” carries with it the taint of old school study in wainscoted reference libraries, whereas “users” implies a certain classlessness, or am I reading too much into it? The trend appears to be towards co-located libraries too, staffed by multi-taskers with insufficient bibliographic knowledge, and so it's not only Joe & Jane Public that's undergoing a retool, but so-called public servants too.

Incidentally Kafka is often summoned up, but it is rarely mentioned that he was a great humorist. Once apparently his friend and editor Max Brod reduced Franz to tears by reading loud the first chapter of *The Trial*. Maybe it's a trial of another

kind for the contemporary artist who seeks to situate their practice in the physical rather than virtual space of the library, with the rules and regulations of a municipal library weighing heavily upon every strategic decision they seek to make?

On a personal note, the first reference library I ever used as an adolescent was run by an alcoholic, who was actually extremely helpful, if you could stand the early morning fumes of his liquid breakfast. Such infringements wouldn't go unpunished nowadays, but my point is that the library regulates us as much as enables us, and this must be something you are only too aware of having completed a residency in Shanghai Library? Has that stood you in good stead for the Wolfson Reading Room experience, or are the regimes totally different?

**ND:** “Users” is a more new-fangled term and no doubt beloved by institutional ideology because it doesn't have that wainscoted tinge. A library – like



any council service – understandably has to present itself as “useful” and up-to-date. “Users” implies classlessness, but inadvertently roboticness too, as though such services could be nothing more than perfunctory; obviously a crying shame when it comes to libraries, which are full of wonder if you look for it.

A library is a rule-bound institution, but surely that regulation is there for us to push against too, especially since the library is full of the products of the human imagination? I’ve always thought of the imagination as a pretty difficult thing to regulate, though perhaps imagination itself is fading along with whatever it was that we used to call knowledge...

What I found so interesting about Shanghai was the sense of a pot coming to the boil: so many people and so many people educated to such a high standard that you could literally feel the tension bubbling. It does not feel like that over here in the UK. The sense of urgency is missing,



but I don't know how to feel about it. The regimes are different. We think we are free, the Chinese know they are not. Who is right? I always considered a library to be a symbol of freedom before I went to China, but that is clearly not the case over there. It makes me wonder now, what freedoms do libraries over here represent? At what point does constraint smother potential? It is impossible to think about libraries without thinking about the state of education in general. Critically it's not just "reader" that is replaced by "user", but "learner" too.

**MH:** In 2015 my revisionist history and tool kit *Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the artists' book* was published by Uniformbooks. In Appendix I 'On Some Tendencies in Bibliotecture: Memorials, Chutes and Shelving' I had a passing look at the ticklish issue of performance or performative installations in the library, and some of its most significant protagonists.

Although your oeuvre has a public profile that isn't at all restricted to libraries per se, you do fit into this growing list of artists who have attempted to establish a base camp for contemporary art and performance inside what has traditionally been a hallowed no-go space: the library. I would argue that this is an extremely positive direction for so-called book arts, a novel phenomenon, and more experimental branch of book history studies, one where the book as physical object and the bibliographic space as *theatrum mundi* or even orientation course are foregrounded. It should be added here that the stakes of such interventions are considerably higher than a display of letterpress materials or altered books in the corner of a reading room. Of course librarians will naturally want to contain and (dare I say it) control book arts practitioners, whilst at the same time want to look cutting-edge by facilitating new partnerships that enhance and open out their collections; but this must go beyond providing an empty vitrine or two! It isn't just about context either but enabling book artists to have free access

to special materials, to navigate their way through largely forgotten holdings and to a certain extent be left to their own devices. The results can be stunning and demonstrate that the library is one spatial domain, together with the museum, stately home and park where new art forms can flourish in the wake of the stultification and decline of the white cube. Take 'Maggs Beneath the Covers', 2012, a group show hosted at the antiquarian bookshop Maggs Bros Ltd, London. Perhaps the very title 'Beneath the Covers' goes a long way to describing the position of the artist active (even disruptive) in bibliographic space? Covert, subtle, almost invisible and belonging more to the night side of the library than its normative quotidian functioning?

**ND:** I agree about the artist tending to act covertly/subtly/invisibly in bibliographic space. I think this fits not only the "hallowed" space of the library, but also books themselves - contents invisible until uncovered. There is also the fact of "bookish" types who do not shout for attention, but



just get on with it quietly. Having said that it has of course made me wonder whether I should try and break the bookish mould - well, maybe not break, but chip? Or at least come out from the shadows a little bit so that the library can be shown not as somewhere to hide, but as somewhere to be found? Thinking again about the difference between the knowledge led society of old and the information driven one we now find ourselves in, maybe this could be visualised as the difference between knowledge as a window on the world and information as more of a mirror?

Your mention of the library at night has reminded me of Bruce Nauman's video of his studio at night - the rats run through, it is their studio and not his - do you mean to say that an artist's use of any given library space is akin to this?

**MH:** Well it's complex, and more about eliding the activities of the artist doing a residency in the public or private library with that of the repressed or hard to track down holdings it contains. The

German romantics called the unconscious the “night side” long before Freud came along with his claim to topographic orthodoxy over unrestrained behaviours. But my query also extends to the way books are preserved first and foremost rather than used as such, conservation always being the good librarian's priority. Obviously *incunabula* do need to be treated with care, but there is an irony there because those books were invariably annotated and functioned as part of a scholarly economy, in much the same way as the commentariat is able to respond to blogposts today. So thinking was exchanged and circulated in the margins. Just look at the library of Dr. Dee for instance. Now of course there is a whole bibliographic industry that focuses on such significant and irrational things as fingerposts and other symbolic shorthand marks, but this way of reading text became frowned upon after the time of Jane Austen and Coleridge, as printing became more of an industry rather than atelier based or cottage industry, which is another paradox. I suppose it was partly a result of mass ownership, but also a diminished need to write on

books if stationery was more readily available. Then the Victorians came along with books such as William Blades's *The Enemies of Books*, 1888 which decried those who wrote in books as philistines and vandals. Although it must be said that there was an awareness that it was a pleasurable mainly female pastime to add text and scraps to books or fire-screens, a demand catered for in the growth of so-called "extra-illustration". But today we have the British Library's No Pens Policy, so damage is limited, but some curiosity lost too. Taking this issue forward slightly though, it can be said that not only is the post Google scan book potentially a building block in some systematic architecture, but also an exhibition space or portable gallery in se, one that stands in for actual 3-D space, though that has been the case since Ruscha's series of photographic taxonomies of garages, real estate and car parks etc. The upshot is that anyone with a smartphone can now compile a photobook, and we are inundated with images, as if humans were intent on documenting everything under the sun before they are wiped out by an exotic virus or

giant meteor event. The recent Offprint book fair at Tate Modern showed this syndrome off perfectly: especially the post pop Japanese photobook as *memento mori*, not photography as a fine art but the visual product of click happy techno operators.

Regarding the difference between knowledge and information, isn't it the case that knowledge is the opposite of superstition, i.e. has a scientific basis, or has been peer reviewed and so tested, whereas information is just an impersonal lumpen mass of unchecked data awaiting verification, in other words unreliable as such until used, but on the plus side also available to all, out there without the need for any masonic handshakes or passwords, which is an oblique criticism of knowledge, since the latter carries lingering undertones of secrecy, occultism and thus an elite class of gatekeepers, wizards or frock coated clerics doesn't it?! Incidentally what do the librarians at Manchester Central Library wear? Hard hats?!





**ND:** I've recently been reading Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* and found out about Freud's "You are requested to close an eye / You are requested to close the eyes" dream. Following this, I've been thinking about how I can read the library space in a consciously unconscious (!) manner. I would like to catch myself off guard with my looking in order to see what I'm missing, a sort of nod to the "night side" via blink-and-I-see-it. Perhaps I am actually talking about an impossible search for some sort of library essence that isn't to be found. Perhaps the joy might be more in the search than the finding? I love the idea of searching for notes in the margins rather than the content of the publications themselves.

I'm not sure about the need to document everything being akin to a desire to preserve it before the little green men cut off our air supply – I think that particular idea of preservation belongs to an older world: for example, the library that systematically collects and preserves knowledge for present and future generations. I would argue

that the present need to collect images is not so that they can be preserved (though they are certainly shared in the moment) but that they are the result of a need to communicate “I am here” in a planet overwhelmed with visual noise: self-advertising, if you will. Future use does not come into it in the same way.

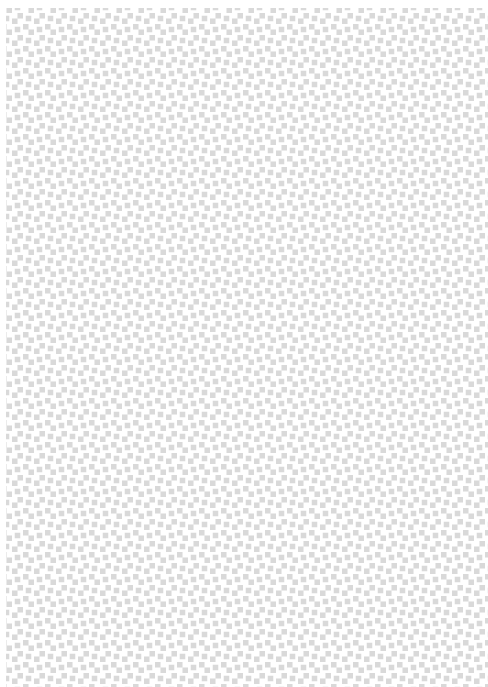
Running alongside this - and now you will see what a cynic I am - is the effect of actual advertising on visual culture. The majority of messages we see every day, no matter how beautiful, complicated, shocking etc. etc., all deliver pretty much the same message: “Buy this product”. Such a distilling of language into this dishearteningly blunt message has a profound effect on our general understanding of images. To put it bluntly, image = product.

Apologies for the lengthy pre-ambler, but to me this is relevant in thinking about Google scan books and the difference between knowledge and information.

I agree that knowledge is something that has been tested and that this verification carries on through when a book is turned into a scan book and available online. However, we understand this because we have come from the world of knowledge, books and libraries. It is very obvious to us that a scan of a book is a) a scan and b) a scan of a book that has been put through editing and reviewing procedures in order for it to enter the world of knowledge. We read the scan as a proxy for the real book. What I find fascinating is how that scan will be read when it is only understood *as an image* and has to vie with all the other images out there. It therefore passes from the realm of knowledge to become: a product (of Google Inc.) and just so many bytes in an avalanche of bytes (information). It is highly likely that someone growing up in a world of images would understand the scan not as a book at all (because how would they even know what that was?), but as a lumpen mass of undifferentiated information, as you wonderfully put it, rather than knowledge, because that is the effect of the medium within

which it is encountered. I am not saying this is true of your generation or of mine, but a few on from now when the digital copy becomes the original?

Whilst I acknowledge the masonic aspects of the world of knowledge, the world of information is hardly better. When I was in China, I found out that there are THOUSANDS of people employed to monitor the internet. On this side of the world, we are clearly not far off a time when our search histories alone will affect health insurance, credit checks, the jobs we can apply for etc. Furthermore, there are still hundreds of thousands of people across the world that have no access to the online world at all. They have little or no education, let alone the ability to distinguish between knowledge and information. In the midst of all this, the library becomes an all the more interesting creature because it is a repository of knowledge in a world that increasingly wants less of it. I am being deliberately provocative, but what is the point of knowledge when the future is owned by those who can amass (or steal) and trade information?



Would you go back on the BL's No Pens policy if you were in charge?!

**MH:** In response to your statement "Whilst I acknowledge the masonic aspects of the world of knowledge", I attach a scan of a heavily scarred Masonic textbook, one presumably marked up by a candidate preparing for initiation. It should be noted that the damage belongs to an era of humble fibre tips, before the advent of fluorescent Staebilo Boss highlighters. Nevertheless it is a collector's item, and in fact part of a specialised sub-section in my own library, of secondhand books that have been annotated. Normally this detracts from value, and these volumes often get "dollared out" into boxes and bins where you can pick them up for £1, or less. Such textual pollution remains behind, traces and tracks of another reader's pattern of consumption and cognition. This is where the beauty and value lay, fortunately not a viewpoint shared by many sellers.

There is nothing especially cynical about your viewpoint. It is an accurate observation of the human condition in which the online has supplanted the real, and the way we are hijacked from the moment of waking, clickdrifting through a day, without direction. So communication is survivalist, and the library complicit in the best way, almost a storage space of our akashic records. But that's a problematic concept.

Attempting to reverse the No Pens Policy would be a non-starter I guess, until attitudes towards reading behaviours changed, and for that to happen a sea change would be required, one that saw conservation emerging from its bunker.

How did you arrive at the title 'It Stares Us Down'?

**ND:** I used to be a *London Review of Books* subscriber and they often take little snippets of sentences in their articles to use as the title. "It stares us down" was a phrase someone used in a review (though where I now cannot remember)



and it seemed like a good summary of my project – one that could reference the Reading Room’s oculus and a sense of the future closing in.

**MH:** It's no longer feasible or desirable for that matter to want to source every quotation, or half quotation. The internet is one huge supercollider of material that has been elsewhere before it gets to us, bumping into other packets of digital quanta, and then stops if it can be called stasis, before we process it and shunt it off somewhere else. The original was never that, but just a momentary combination subject to recombination or remix. The problem with copyright is that it was tabled to protect the so-called genius of the author, as the publishing and printing of novels became industrialised through steam in the early 19th century. Now we've got Jane Austen with rotting zombies, and so on. It's a different mindset (or post-subjectivity), and technological ballpark, but copyright law lags behind, unable to properly cope with the internet.

The oculus at Manchester Library is a striking quasi-ecclesiastical feature: window, aperture, vent, eye. *Fiat lux*. Do you think it subconsciously prefigured the ubiquity of 21st century electronic surveillance gadgets in public buildings? What was the security like in Shanghai library by comparison, and did you unwittingly fall foul of it during your residency?

**ND:** It seems to me that the way to deal with "quotation" is to acknowledge influence but make sure to add your own voice to the conversation as it passes through history. The trouble is you then get people who have nothing at all to say, or are lazy, so they simply steal and it goes unnoticed because everyone is struggling with how to deal with the juggernaut that is the internet. I think there should be acknowledgment of individual voices - there is genius out there - but at the same time also recognise that the same idea can crop up in several places at once, quite naturally, so the claim to ownership is debatable.



The oculus is definitely ecclesiastical. I know it's a question of both practicality and aesthetics to have the issue terminal directly underneath it, but that does suggest the great eye was looking down on the staff in particular and the readers only in the second instance. It's a pleasing hierarchy in some ways – the watcher watching the watchers. I think at some deep level it works NOW as a surveillance tool - the "God's eye view" parallels with modern surveillance systems are obvious. But there is definitely something more: given the room's size and the total lack of staff, it does police itself successfully. I have not witnessed any disorder in the reading room, though of course I wouldn't be surprised if there were laptop thefts etc. Having said that, it just has a different atmosphere to the rest of the building. The architecture undoubtedly affects mood and behaviour.

The security at Shanghai library was ostensibly "normal". I had to use my passport in order to get a reader's card to access the building, so they have me on file, but it's not like I really tested them by

looking up incendiary texts in the catalogue! I am not brave enough to do that and had I caused any problem there I have no doubt that my hosts at the College of Fine Arts would have got into serious trouble and I didn't want that on my conscience. The feeling of suppression was ever present. It is very hard to explain, but it was almost a physical layer over everything; all those people under such pressure.

**MH:** This last line is revealing. It does sum up the current relentless quality of modern existence, where nobody is satisfied, their expectations are never met, and there is an endemic culture of blame because life hasn't worked out well, though there isn't the time or the tools for that matter to analyse anything and come up with a way forward that works, rather than yet another so called solution that only exacerbates things.

I'm guessing that you are under pressure too, as at a certain level the idea of an artist or worse still performer operating in a library does indicate that

this erstwhile hallowed space is undergoing perestroika, undergoing a crisis, and the presence of a visual artist in residence is a token of this change, and critical redesign, which is a euphemism generally for downsizing etc. It wouldn't surprise me if the public library of the future is quite a different animal, more of a place to work-out, with books its least attractive option. Dreadful to a traditionalist. Maybe though the conceptual intervention of a book artist, despite that still being a strange compound, is one way to open up productive conversations about the direction and role that these institutions will take, facilitating a cognitive space rather than a heavily surveilled one, if only temporarily?

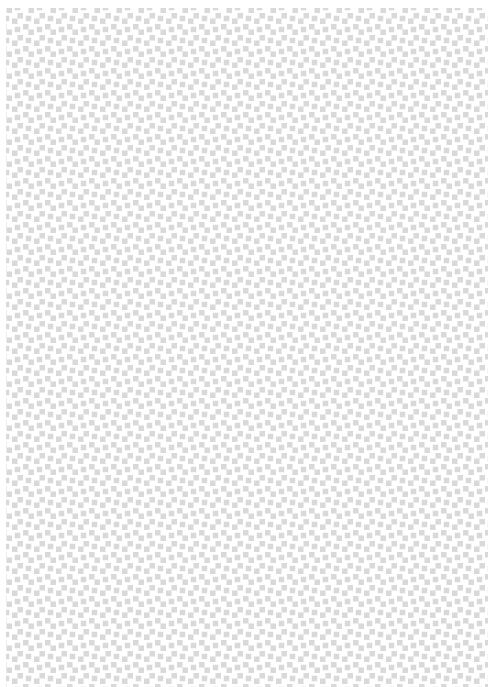
**ND:** It's the truth underlying the promise of technological freedom isn't it - suppression at best, slavery at worst?

I've always been a not-fitting-in sort of a person (recognising both good and bad about this) and so for me, I like the idea of making artwork for a

library because it is not an art gallery, although it might have a similar reverential tradition.

As for the library, I can see that one positive of letting an artist in is a sense of "adapt or die". Downsizing might occur, although in the case of Manchester Central Library, the decision to spend so much money on the rebuild was very recent and they simply will not let it fail. A negative of that for me is that they may well have agreed to let me in because they will do anything to attract more visitors! "Live" events are certainly very popular everywhere at the moment, what with performance experiencing a renaissance and concert attendance skyrocketing. Tis the fashion, though what happens when this fashion makes way for something else? If that something else is about introversion, the library may well survive it - what better place to go and be alone in the middle of town?

**MH:** Yes doing your civic duty!





I recently learned about another library that was equipped with an oculus, which after all is a glorified skylight. In the 1920s the über art historian Aby Warburg designed a library next to his home in Hamburg that included a reading room or circular *denkraum* with mezzanine and a loose thematic taxonomy of its books into Orientation, Image, Word, Action. This was an expression of innate mental rhythms, instead of the conventional object collection.

Warburg's oculus was actually massive almost as if it were a clear marigold window from a Gothic cathedral laid flat, allowing a flood of light to drop down onto a group of rather dull, it must be said, square wooden tables surrounded by sets of four diner's chairs. But there again the sepia image I've seen of this space in the *Bibliothek Warburg* is bereft of people, as with those sterile postcard images of tourist hotels in which every tablecloth is perfectly ironed, every knife, fork and spoon in position, but not a guest to be seen. It could almost be an empty cabaret, which after all is the best-known social

leitmotiv of the Weimar Republic, i.e. the very era in which this elite library was established. Maybe the contemporary performative aspect of the artist in the library is also a type of intellectual cabaret, one designed to unglue the reader/user from their seats, to break down the behavioral rigidity that usually pertains in such institutions?

**ND:** Warburg's last category, "Action," seems particularly resonant with the idea of intellectual cabaret (what an idea!). I had not thought about my planned performances in this way at all. I've been reading Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies*, in which early on he says "We feel imprisoned in a momentum that is not of our own making". Perhaps the cabaret aspect could counter a sense of confinement and control?

**MH:** Cognitive cabaret?! It might just work what with all with the shenanigans going on in public libraries cross the land.

**ND:** Do you think that one of the problems that libraries now face is that they represent a kind of inwardness, tranquility and indeed privacy of thought about which we are encouraged to feel embarrassed or disdainful?

I heard one of Donald Trump's supporters on the radio recently and she spoke about how the intellectuals have had their day (paraphrase) and I thought that's it isn't it? Old-school libraries are just too encouraging of the "wrong" kind of community. It's not just the God references in the Reading Room that feel antiquated, it's the notion of a community of shared privacy, the tacit agreement not to be networked. (I know that the online world seems like an extension of millions of private worlds out into the ether, but really it's the extension of the public right into our homes isn't it?)

**MH:** It grieves me to say this, but perhaps the Moebius strip that is used so cunningly by Virgin Media as their logo, or operating symbol does

actually give a graphic form to the state of affairs you are describing. Personally I no longer belong to my local library because of a sort of break down of law and order in the Edwardian Reference Library, that wasn't helped by the weakness of the ageing and somewhat bewildered staff, and a stripping away of certain periodicals from shelves, leaving only reference material supplying information that you can easily find on the internet. The atmosphere of hush had been replaced by constant noise and distraction of one kind or another. I decamped to Rare Books at the British Library, where there aren't any teens surfing on mobiles or eating greasy food. The olde worlde carved wood and heraldic decor of my local reading room no longer held any particular charm either, staid and excessively municipal. It's strange how your views change, but there was a Round Table air to the place which in retrospect perhaps caused some of the unruly behaviour. Ultimately it's why the BL is so effective, as it is modern in style and democratic in function but without any of the snobbism attached.





# Images

---

The cover image is a scan of the *Camden Journal*, June-July 1972

Each copy of this publication includes a different selection of images from the following:

Books on Prescription, NHS leaflet, 2000s  
Central Library roof, staff off duty, 1952  
Central Library under construction, 1932  
Child dressed as a pilgrim in the maze, Boëtius Bolswert, 1590  
Defend the 10, Lambeth Librarians, 2016  
*Episode in a Small Town Library*, Ian Breakwell, 1970  
Great Hall, coating the ceiling with asbestos, Manchester Central Library, 1969  
Great Hall, dome, Manchester Central Library, 1934  
Great Hall, table E, Manchester Central Library, 1938  
Historic Libraries Forum bookmark, 2005  
Libraries Gave Us Power, badge, 2000s  
Libraries in England 2016-21 website, 2016  
Library News, *Private Eye* no. 1418, May 2016  
LS Lowry, *The Reference Library*, undated  
Manchester Central Library, BDP Architects' visualization, 2012  
Manchester Library and Town Hall postcard, 1950s  
Masonic overwriting, undated  
National Library Week, bookmark, undated  
Progress symbol, Apple, 2016  
Reading Room, Manchester Central Library, 2014  
Rolevinck rubricator's doodle, undated  
Scribbled book, *The Principles of Archive Repair*, 1968  
Souvenir handkerchief, Manchester Central Library, 17 July 1934  
Speak up for Libraries website, 2016  
*The Artist Overwhelmed by the Magnitude of Antique Ruins*, Henry Fuseli, 1780





# Acknowledgements

---

Many thanks to the following readers and writers who gave up their time to make each copy of this edition unique:

Danny Aldred  
Emalee Beddoes  
Bidisha  
Nick Cash  
Nicola Dale  
Bob Dickinson  
Lucy M Evans  
Douglas Field  
Gustavo Grandal Montero  
Michael Hampton  
Ajay Hothi  
Sarah Jacobs  
Sara Jaspan  
Jay Jeff Jones  
Sharon Kivland  
Joanna Loveday  
Charlotte A Morgan  
Ailís Ní Riain  
Nick Norton  
Sian Norris  
Gill Partington  
Sarah Simpkin  
Nigel Slight  
Adam Smyth  
Emmanuelle Waeckerle



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**HOME**



**MANCHESTER  
CITY COUNCIL**

## Notes

---



