Lost and Found

ARTISTS' BOOKS Sarah Bodman explores
The Library of Lost Books, an initiative to salvage and
transform discarded library volumes

I first met Susan Kruse, the curator of this project at the Manchester
Artist’s Book Fair in 2011. Kruse’s table was adjacent to ours and we
quickly got chatting about books and in turn, her remarkable project.
The Library of Lost Books, based in Birmingham, UK was founded
that September, when Kruse realized that withdrawn books at the
central library were destined for recycling as pulp, as the library staff
began preparation for the move to a new purpose-built library. Kruse
confesses that, when she noticed the large blue bin, ‘being nosy, I
opened the lid to discover that it was full of old books’. Horrified, she
began to salvage those books she could carry and decided to curate
a project that would give them new life as works of art. From the
discards, Kruse selected 48 titles including novels, manuscripts and
music sheets and sent them out to invited artists and printmakers
to turn into altered books.

The idea of recycling withdrawn library books into artists’ books
has surfaced previously, most notably in the project Long Overdue:
Book Renewal, a collaboration between Maine College of Art and
the Portland Public Library, that saw 200 artists turn withdrawn
books into works of art to re-enter into the library system for the
public to borrow. And of course many individual artists create altered
books; Brian Dettmer, Su Blackwell, Alexander Korzer-Robinson
and Guy Begbie for example, produce wonderfully inventive works
from discarded books.

Kruse is not making any protest at the discarding of library books,
as she explained at a talk she gave about the project at Manchester
Artist’s Book Fair a year later in 2012, ‘partly because I agree with many
of the arguments for it, partly because Birmingham Libraries have
helped to enable the project, but mostly because if they hadn’t thrown
the books out I wouldn’t have got my greedy mitts on them!’

Kruse’s dedication to the project is admirable. From starting out
two years ago with no funding, Kruse has determinedly curated the
project, encouraged people to join in, devised membership schemes to
help with exhibition costs, and built a network of artists and academics
who have supported the project through their contributions, whether
creating books or arranging associated events. Kruse has a small army
of dedicated supporters, referred to as ‘the project’s fairy Godmothers
and Godfathers’, and acknowledges a great amount of encouragement
and support from staff at Wolverhampton University, in partic-
ular Jessica Glaser, and from Sheaffer, who are funding the production
costs of a book about the project.

The new Library of Birmingham opened its doors to the public
this September, as one of the largest public libraries in Europe. The
Library of Lost Books returned a selection of its books for exhibition
as part of the opening festival in November 2013. Alongside the
exhibition, a three-day conference celebrating the book in all its forms
was organized in collaboration with the Library of Birmingham,
Dr Matthew Day from Newman University College, Birmingham,
and Caroline Archer, head of the typographic hub at the University
of Central England. ‘Resurrecting the Book’ took place in the new
library (www.resurrectingthebook.org), with plenary speakers including
the American critic Johanna Drucker.

The list of participants who have altered books for the project
includes some well-known book artists: Les Bicknell, Kate Buxton
and Elizabeth Willow are just a few of the 48 contributors. Some
beautiful examples of works in the exhibition include Linda Carrerio’s
piece, which was returned from Calgary, Canada. The cover of the
1806 publication was cut into a boat shape, but the book remains
intact, presented in a maplewood case full of tiny handmade paper
boats. I especially like how the Birmingham Free Libraries stamp from
1901 has been carefully incorporated into the prow of the upper-
most boat. The Man Who Died Twice by Edwin Arlington Robinson,
was reworked by Freya Pocklington. A completely transformed cover
now contains drawings of mythical creatures depicting life in the
inner-city rat race. Pictorial Paper Cutting for Children by Ellice G.
Benton (1936), has been meticulously hand-altered by the artist
Ian Pyper into a beautiful new work. All the books, having resided
temporarily in Birmingham’s new library – a building that is full of
hope for the future of the book – are off again, and will travel in
exhibitions around the UK during 2014. Catch them if you can!

For project updates visit: http://thelibraryoflostbooks.blogspot.com
For details of the Library Membership Scheme visit: http://thelibraryoflostbooks.org

Images
Freya Pocklington, altered bookwork for the Library of Lost Books, 2013. Photograph: Prof David Knight