



## Curation and Library Services

Plan

September 2018

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Date: September 2018

Approved by: SMT

Type: Plan

## Contents

<b>1. Context and Overview.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Leadership.....	3
<b>2. Report on Current Practice, Achievements and Challenges</b>	
2.1 Programming.....	4
2.2 Interpretation .....	5
2.3 Audiences.....	5
2.4 Collections.....	6
2.5 Performance Indicators.....	6
<b>3. Recommendations</b>	
3.1 International Advisory Board .....	9
3.2 Programming .....	9
3.3 Acquisitions for Special Collections.....	10
3.4 Performance Indicators.....	11
<b>4. Initial Timeline .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5. Conclusions .....</b>	<b>12</b>

## **1. Context and Overview**

The attainment of university status at Leeds Arts University coincided with the merger of Curation with Library Services as well as a range of new roles created during restructure including the University Curator, University Librarian, Senior Subject Librarian, Research Coordinator, Subject Library Assistants in addition to our existing Curatorial Assistant. An Exhibition Strategy, closely aligned with our Research Strategy, and was launched in July 2015. An updated Plan is now due in 2018. This present Plan offers a key moment for reflection and change management - an opportunity to build on the existing strengths of both teams as well as collaboration across these lively and innovative areas as both areas move into the new build at Leeds Arts University. The new library will become programmed as a key exhibition space, and exhibitors in the new gallery will be encouraged to utilise the library collections as a unique, specialist resource.

The overarching ambition is, therefore, the integration of the two areas: Library collections will be used more cogently within curated exhibitions, and, reciprocally, there will be a more curation-focussed investment in the Library agenda. Notions of the 'library artist,' 'research curator' and 'archival imagination' will help drive creative and curatorial leadership in this area henceforth, broadly understood through a 'curation of knowledge' with a significant responsibility for the visibility and accessibility of research, both internally and externally. The new gallery and library space at Blenheim Walk are positioned as key sites that will accommodate this strategic endeavour.

### **1.1 Leadership**

The area is overseen by a research curator who is taking steps within the broader cultural sphere to champion and demystify the role of the University Gallery and provide a strong identity and mission statement for this area. The University Curator will ensure ongoing dialogue and intersection between the two areas, enabling artists to use the Library within their research and supporting Library staff with a variety of curatorial ambitions (including Library Interventions and ongoing research into the University Archive). A dovetailing emphasis on research and alumni will continue to underpin the thinking and strategic direction, linking the Research

Excellence Framework (REF) submission and Open Access requirements with the critical positioning of the University as a cultural leader. Another ambition is to work towards museum accreditation which will involve detailed environmental documentation and audience surveys.

## **2. Report on Current Practices, Achievements and Challenges**

The Library is one of the highest performing areas in the institution, with an excellent track record of positive NSS results. There exists a range of archival and curatorial expertise within the team which will be freed up as the self-service system comes into action. As a specialist arts library, this resource is uniquely placed as material for curatorial practices. The Curation programme is the public-facing, peer-reviewed platform for practice-based, interdisciplinary art and design research from within the University and beyond. It provides a major contribution to the overall research environment, and has the capacity to generate select research outputs.

### **2.1 Programming**

Library Interventions has evolved significantly since its inception, now annually featuring a keynote artist/curator/academic to lead the project and provide thematic scope. Participating artists are invited through competitive application to work alongside cultural leaders.

Currently Curation has approximately 20 exhibitions per annum, as well as smaller exhibits across the six spaces over two campuses. Quality over quantity has always been a driving principle, and going forward it will be vital to get the balance right between lively rotation and research displays of quality and depth.

The annual international exhibition provides an opportunity to invite an exhibitor/guest curator from abroad. Going forward it will be important to extend this international ambition and to continue to benchmark by showing excellence in practice-based research from other Universities as well as within.

Recent experiments in programming have diversified the annual rhythm, including the notion of the performative intervention - a one-day performance/installation

caesura between longer term installations/de-installations. These have proven very popular as a platform for temporary exhibitions.

Micro-residencies have also been trialled. So far this has become manifest as an annual writing residency in collaboration with Corridor 8 magazine but this could be extended towards the Library, enabling artists access to a wealth of research materials.

New models for research exhibitions have been trialled including an open doors approach towards installations, enabling a select number of students and visitors to participate and gain experience of the hang. This provides a range of insights and transferable skills, enabling participants to test their skills within the safe learning environment of the University. Another model has enabled graduates and early career artists to show alongside mid-career and senior, international artists. Again such dialogic curatorial practices hone and deepen the research content, and contribute directly to teaching, learning and professional development.

## **2.2 Interpretation**

A multi-layered, accessible approach is taken to interpretation, from short text panels to more detailed commissioned essays by external academics. At present, at least one major public engagement talk or event is scheduled per exhibition. Both provide audience members with a range of understandings and engagement opportunities as well as networking and knowledge exchange beyond the initial preview/launch event.

Interpretation texts are regularly commissioned for exhibitions, attractively designed and printed, and available free of charge. Going forward it will be important that catalogues and related ephemera are stored and made available electronically in order to create a digital repository of resources and for compliance with Open Access policies as specified by HEFCE and REF. The Library will have a key role to play in the promotion of this material.

## **2.3 Audiences**

The audiences for Curation at Leeds Arts University predominantly comprise a loyal following of staff, students (particularly masters students and recent graduates) and local art enthusiasts. Exhibitions make a significant contribution to the overall Research Environment, at its strongest when Leeds Arts University is thought about as a community of researchers, practitioners and as having a ‘family’ heritage. Going forward it will be important to maintain existing audiences whilst encouraging new audiences (e.g. children and young adults) for the purposes of equality, diversity, inclusivity and impactful public engagement. The University Curator is currently looking towards the CHEAD university gallery network for guidance in this area, and it is envisaged that a member of this network could be invited to expand the Exhibitions International Advisory Board (see below).

## **2.4 Collections**

Leeds Arts University now has over a 170 years of history, including outstanding internationally recognised alumni. The institution’s collections have been accruing since at least the 1990s, though in a relatively ad hoc manner, now much in need of formalisation.

### **2.4.1 University Art Collection**

The University Art Collection currently comprises 376 items through the Liberty catalogue system. This collection is currently Fine Art orientated with several examples of work by former students and staff, particularly strong on art historical examples of work by Jacob Kramer, Edna Lumb, and Laimonis Mierins. The collection also hosts individual examples of work by select alumni, as well as numerous editioned prints acquired for contemporary art exhibitions by the former Exhibition Manager (2007-2014).

### **2.4.2 University Archive**

The University Archive is of vital importance in collecting and reflecting the institution’s long history. As a congregation of multiple materials including letter and exhibition ephemera, it has been gleaned from many sources and now requires more strategic direction. Over the last year, the majority of the archival material

has been catalogued (divided into ten series, with many more sub-series, files, and items), and now requires digitisation in order to open this resource through the Liberty catalogue. Physically, the University Archive is about to be housed more accessibly within a designated space in the new Blenheim Walk Library. Going forward it would be useful if potential additions to this resource could be agreed through the Acquisitions panel. This panel could also help develop the scope and purpose of the University Archive, defining what it collects and why, as well as respond to any data protection and freedom of information inquiries.

### **2.4.3 Artist's Books**

The Library has been building this notable collection for over eighteen years - currently the collection is represented by more than a thousand items. These are books conceived and created by an artist. They usually bypass the publishing industry, often display artisan attention to detail, and consequently appear in limited runs or as unique additions. The form of the book is pushed, tested, or played with, and this sometimes results in ephemeral and/or fragile creations. Attention is always given to the interaction between the book's status as an object and its content: the book itself as art. This combination of qualities opens the collection up to interests across many of our curriculum areas; all print related activities, graphic, fashion and textile, as well as visual communication and fine art. A rich resource of notable research value; many students have commented on how inspirational contact with this collection has been for them.

### **2.4.4 Photobooks**

A parallel collection to the Artist's Books in many ways. This collection has been building for seven years and contains over six hundred titles. The photobook is defined as a book conceived of by the photographer, who maintains a high degree of editorial and design control. Once again, limited runs are usual and a range of publishing and binding techniques are represented. Photobooks exist within an active collectors' market so the cost of these items often escalates dramatically after publication. More importantly, the Photobook sits squarely within the pedagogic concerns of the photography curriculum; examples in this collection touch on emerging and established photographic practice and speak to the dynamic of

photography gallery, publishing, and career, as well as offering up research opportunity and creative inspiration.

#### **2.4.4 Illustrative Books**

The youngest of the library's Special Collections, not yet numbering above one hundred items; Illustrative Books are defined as books whose meaning and form hangs on the illustrated content: Comics, graphic novels, illustrated texts, picture books, or zines. (Zines are defined as independently produced magazines. Most are of a pamphlet format, either stapled or stitched.) Unlike the two previous categories, this Special Collection does hold items from mainstream publishers or larger print runs. However, the curation of this repository is looking for the following unique elements: Design - where design and format have been used to push the concept of what an illustrative book can be. Fragility - books that are fragile and would be damaged easily. Edition - books that are printed in limited or special editions (may include signature, alternative binding, ephemera etc.). Cost - books which are expensive to buy and would be difficult to replace. Illustrative Books has a direct and vibrant relationship with several curriculum areas, offering up examples of best practice and unique research avenues. It has also become the host of an annual brief for which students re-design and re-cover a book chosen from the general collection. The winning entries are honoured with a place inside the Collection for a year.

#### **2.5 Performance Indicators**

An annual footfall is currently recorded through a combination of means, including registration for events, headcounts at previews, and an invigilator's sample which is taken as an average. To date, exhibitions receive approximately 13,000 visits per annum. Going forward it will be important to develop these figures and their accuracy.

The exhibition programme has received regular press and media attention from a range of national newspapers and channels (including Art Monthly, Corridor 8, Made in Leeds TV and The Yorkshire Post) as well as increased attention from academic journals. However, in this competitive climate, any form of external press and promotion should always be seen as achievements rather than expectations.

### **3. Recommendations**

As Leeds Arts University moves towards greater recognition in the higher education landscape, the area of Curation and Library Services will have an important role to play. Noticeable improvements are required particularly in the area of Open Access and commitment to research training and dissemination. Greater attention needs devoted to Special Collections in terms of promotion, display, research and interpretation. Over the next five years, the full potential of Curation and Library Services will be unlocked as the University Art Collection, University Archive and other Special Collections are maximised.

#### **3.1 International Advisory Board**

In the new build, the larger exhibition space is already proving more competitive and in demand through application. This will need reflected in the make-up of the International Advisory Board who may need to take an even more rigorous approach to selecting exhibition proposals. At present the Advisory Board is made up of seven individual experts representing a broad range of backgrounds as well as the student body. This Board guides the University Curator on decision-making as a form of external peer-review. This pool now needs expanded in order to cope with the influx of new proposals. Currently the attitude has been to develop proposals after feedback but the University Curator should have more authority to shortlist or decline proposals, especially those that do not fit with the University's broader strategic plan or reflect the immediate needs in teaching and research. Practice-based research should still be at the heart of exhibition proposals, and applicants will be encouraged to show how they are going to utilise the Library and its resources within their project or as part of the research process (for example, extracts from a book could enhance understanding and interpretation of a particular theme or research question). Template proposal forms will require editing to meet these requirements and to provide further guidelines.

#### **3.2 Programming**

A three-month duration for Exhibitions was trialled between 2015 and 2018 but a six-week duration may be seen as the golden standard for this institution given its size and population. Six weeks will enable reflection time and opportunities for

responsive public engagement without exhibits becoming overlooked. The Library will also become an exhibition space with an emphasis on research displays in liaison with the Open Access provided by our CREST repository. Library Interventions will continue the ambitious annual programme already achieved, and, in addition, a resident Library Artist will be selected on a six monthly basis to assist in augmenting the Library user experience. It is also proposed that a rota of curated shelves and displays by Subject Library Assistants will be implemented using house-style interpretation text panels. This is tentatively entitled 'Librarian's Choice' in order to parallel the existing 'Curator's Choice' cabinets.

Micro-residencies for writers have proven popular as modes of working, and these should now be evolved and embedded in the Library. It will be the responsibility of staff in Curation and Library Services to create the required conditions for artists and guest curators to explore these rich and unique repositories.

A major interest for the University Curator is the critical afterlife of the exhibition. This encompasses reflection and detailed evaluation of how exhibition content and ideas might traverse physical and/or conceptual boundaries and what the long-term impact of an exhibition's legacy might be. It is important that this reflective and evaluative work continues to evolve, and that exhibitors are invited back after a given period of time wherever possible. For example, it is important that we continue to foster our graduate success stories immediately after graduation as well as further along their career paths.

### **3.3 Acquisitions for Special Collections**

Another area in need of development, attention and growth is our institution-wide stance on acquisitions for Special Collections. Guidelines are required, especially for incoming inquiries, insurance valuation, and best practice in Collections Development. Often Leeds Arts University is approached by collectors and dealers as well as auction houses. Decisions often have to be made quickly, responsively and opportunistically - often in isolation. There are also storage, insurance, and long-term care/conservation issues to consider. It is therefore prudent to inaugurate a panel or sub-committee specifically focussed on decisions around acquisitions and

requisitions, especially for the purpose of Special Collections. Chaired by the University Curator and with representation from the Vice Chancellor, Alumni Officer, Student Union President and Ethics Chair, it is envisaged that this panel would report into SMT, meeting once a term to discuss potential proposals and requisitions that have been received. It is expected that due diligence checks will be carried out before deciding whether to accept anything to the Special Collections and appropriate contracts between the University and the donor or seller will be drawn up. Moreover, it is of vital importance that we begin to reflect our equality, diversity and inclusivity agenda within our acquisitions practices. Work by women, LGBTQ+ and BME alumni are currently under-represented within Special Collections which predominantly comprises materials by (often deceased) white male artists. In programming, the University Curator actively seeks proposals which will inspire and represent a range of audiences, both internally and externally. Programming is thematic and consciously diverse covering a broad range of backgrounds and media. Acquisitions for Special Collections require the same approach.

Dedicated spaces for the safe and secure storage and study of this material also need implemented. The new gallery requires an appropriate racking system with which to house this important material. In the new Library, the Archive will be housed within a Research Room located behind the main information desk.

### **3.4 Performance Indicators**

The new build is likely to witness a sizeable increase in footfall given its public spotlight and the proximity of an adjacent cafe where visitors will have more convenient breakout spaces to meet and discuss exhibits over refreshments. It is suggested that a thermal body counter be installed as a quantifiable calculator. Going forward, the University Curator would also like to develop a system for exhibition evaluation with a focus on qualitative feedback rather than quantitative footfall alone. Such performance indicators will contribute to the evidence and narrative required by REF. In terms of reach, it will be important to evidence the use of exhibitions in teaching as well as the cascading outcomes of exhibition research.

As Leeds Arts University works towards a possible museum accreditation, it is vital that such infrastructure can be demonstrated.

#### **4. Initial Timeline**

**October-December 2018:** Preparations for Move including RFID tagging; establishment of Open Access work flow through Research Coordinator; establishment of first Library Artist resident; selection and preparation of Library Interventions 2019; invitations to new International Advisory Board Members.

**January-June 2019:** Opening of New Build to include major international exhibition; exhibition of Library Artist and Library Interventions including annual symposium on library art and research curation; self-service will be active.

**By July 2019:** New Curation and Library Services programming will have been trialled and will continue in six month intervals, disseminated through the Exhibition Brochure (both print and online).

**By August 2019:** New feedback system will have been implemented.

**By September 2019:** At least one research output per academic contracted at Leeds Arts University will have been uploaded on the CREST repository system; evaluation of Special Collections use in research-led teaching.

#### **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the key recommendations are as follows:

- Set up an Acquisitions Panel with representation from the Vice Chancellor.
- Expand the International Advisory Board for peer-review.
- Integration of Curation and Library Services through commitments to the visibility of research and key opportunities for research-led teaching through Special Collections.
- Major research exhibitions should run for a six-week duration with an extended two-week installation turn-around for exhibition rehangings enabling a one-day performance/installation/curatorial intervention.
- Continue and develop the micro-residencies for external artists as well as writers. Encourage the use of the Library within applications wherever possible.

- Procure and install a thermal body counter for exhibitions.

To reiterate, the notion of the 'library artist' and 'research curator' will become intrinsic to our identity and future directions in programming, international recognition, and provide a necessary research agenda for this area. Overall, the merging of Curation and Library Services offer a timely opportunity to creatively respond to our University status through the curation of knowledge.