

The Metropolitan Complex

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Libraries

Matthew Bakkom
and
Sarah Pierce

In conversation

On Thursday 20 May 2004, the following conversation took place in Matthew Bakkom's studio at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Sarah Pierce invited Bakkom to have an informal discussion about libraries. There was no audience present.

Sarah Pierce I was invited to do a show in Whitechapel's project space about a year ago by two curators whose idea was to collect works and arrange them in a sort of library/reading room. I made a special printed edition and about half way through the show the box I had sent over was returned to me unopened. It never made it to the exhibition.

Matthew Bakkom So they never received your piece for the show and they thought that was normal?

Sarah Pierce No, but I guess they didn't think it was abnormal, and I didn't bother to make sure it had arrived. We all felt bad about it. When this re-enactment was proposed to do the show again in Copenhagen at Appendiks I decided not to send the original piece, to have it remain missing, and to instead do a new piece for Copenhagen, which is where you come in. In terms of a methodology you use libraries to make your work. I like the idea of borrowing systems and incorporating them into an art practice. The library, and its precepts of lending public materials for private use is extraordinary within a larger cultural context.

Matthew Bakkom The library is one of the ultimate expressions of a notion of the public.

Sarah Pierce What is your favourite library?

Matthew Bakkom Now, that is a very difficult question. There are so many different kinds of libraries. I don't know about a favourite, but the library that stands out as a collection that I've used more than any other is the Donnell Media Center of the New York Public Library. Their 16mm film collection specifically.

Sarah Pierce How have you used it?

Matthew Bakkom I founded and then directed the operation of a cinema club, *La Vista*, in New York between 1998 and 2002. We did over 100 screenings based on that collection. We'd build schedules based on the catalogue, borrow the films and show them on Sunday nights in the East Village.

Sarah Pierce You primarily used the films in the collection?

Matthew Bakkom Exclusively— that was the parameter of the project and what made it interesting to me. It is probably the most extensive collection of 16mm film that is available to the public anywhere in the world.

Sarah Pierce So you were able to walk into the library and walk out with a 16mm film?

Matthew Bakkom When I arrived I was deeply impressed, but also shocked

that they had a circulating 16mm film collection. The films they have and the quality isn't matched by a lot of private institutions out there. It is a well-built collection, well overseen, there have been only two directors in it's life, so as a collection it is organic and cohesive. When I arrived to the collection in 1998 only two-thirds of it was circulating. Building a rapport with the people who are taking care of a collection is part of what I do, so I was able to make requests to use films that weren't actually in circulation to the general population.

Sarah Pierce You built a practice around the library, its workers and its collection.

Matthew Bakkom It's the place where I was able to make my most personal relationships to a library, and that consistency brought about this idea of an exhibition system. To me the physical space is the crux of a library— and what differentiates it from the research potential of the Internet, for instance. Physical space is important.

Sarah Pierce So what do you look for in a library, physically. (giggling)

Matthew Bakkom Well, you know I'm versatile. It depends on the mood. I'm quite flexible when it comes to physical dimension. (more giggling)

Sarah Pierce Whatever is available in the city you happen to be in?

Matthew Bakkom Availability means a lot. I have been happy during my travels and in the various places I've lived to enjoy many types of libraries. I tend to go very early on to the library if I am going to be in a place for a while. Although it depends on the city. In a recent residency in Paris it took a little longer, perhaps because of the language barrier. But there is definitely a lot of usability to a library space without speaking the language the books are in.

Sarah Pierce Perhaps we should discuss your first experience with a library.

Matthew Bakkom My original library experience, my formative experience, was in the Minneapolis Public Library— the downtown central branch of the city's public libraries. It was a place that for me was linked to discovering the city in general. It was a place that I would go into independently after school when I was 14, 15, 16. It was a place, like many American libraries, that was one of the only really public spaces in the city. Everyone downtown was in the library, from business people, to homeless people, to students. This particular building was built in 1964 in a kind of modernist, aspirant, style but also modest. Bright, light, clean lines, wood panelling.

Sarah Pierce I like the idea of being a teenager and associating the library with a larger sense of the city. I remember the library in the town I grew up in had a large public pool attached, so that to me other libraries seemed inadequate. You were supposed to go swimming and get books. Public libraries and public pools came together.

Matthew Bakkom They do for me. That's my scene right there.

Sarah Pierce How did the city library capture your attention you as a teen?

Matthew Bakkom Growing up in Minneapolis it offered a public space with a certain level of excitement, not just intellectually, but socially, in terms of whom you might meet, or be dealing with in that space. You never really knew. Flirtation was part of it, and then there were the books. They had a 16mm collection there too, although I didn't know that then. I didn't understand how all these systems worked. My 20s sealed the deal in my affection for libraries. In the university setting libraries have a different meaning. They are somewhat normalised. I had a very important experience related to the new library at the University of Virginia which happened to be the media library. I discovered an awful lot of important things about the cinema in that library. They had a big video collection.

Sarah Pierce So you discovered other systems, beyond the books.

Matthew Bakkom I learned a lot and it laid a lot of groundwork. I think I watched all the new German directors at that library.

Sarah Pierce Just sitting in a cubicle with headphones.

Matthew Bakkom And being really engaged in probably the worst cinematic environment.

Sarah Pierce Do you think there is an ethical system built around the library? Beyond just borrowing books?

Matthew Bakkom It's a different kind of accountability, or ethics than we see in other so-called public places. It's also a different expectation. For instance, I don't think anybody should loan a book to a friend that they want to see again.

Sarah Pierce Because we all know as friends that sometimes we borrow books that we never return. We lend books and never see them again.

Matthew Bakkom It just happens that way. It's gone. You are giving it out in exchange for a book that you will borrow from another friend.

Sarah Pierce Without a date stamped in the back I forget it isn't mine.

Matthew Bakkom Sadly what is dying out is the stamping, that indexing moment that happens in the back of a library book.

Sarah Pierce Do you look to see how many people borrowed the book before you, and for how long?

Matthew Bakkom Absolutely. It's the provenance of the book. If only it listed the names of the people too. Of course the US government is very interested to see names of people and the books they borrow.

Sarah Pierce When did the idea of a public borrowing library come about?

Matthew Bakkom In the US it is a phenomenon of the last 100 years or so. The Carnegie Library, as a public borrowing library, dates to the late 1800s. The library existed, but privately and the system shifts with the idea of a lending to a general public. We forget that in the 1700s to have a personal library in the US was a big deal. That is how the first historical societies came about. People had books, but also papers, deeds, etc.

Sarah Pierce You have done a lot of work using the model of the historical society. How are they different or similar to libraries?

Matthew Bakkom The historical society is interesting in that it is an American invention as far as I have been able to find out. There are groups of people who care about history and get together, in Dublin for instance. But it's not the same as the genesis of the historical society in the US. The New York Historical Society for example, which is the one I researched the most, is based on a moment of recognition among the elite around the turn of the 18th and 19th century, where these families realised they held the founding documents of the city and state of New York. Their private papers and letters were the story of a place. So they created an organisation that would be the depository of these documents.

Sarah Pierce So the private holdings of the rich feed a city's heritage through a municipal imperative to keep records?

Matthew Bakkom The historical society has always had this lineage formed by wealthy landholders. In New York this organisation was in shambles and was looking for a place to house its material for the first 50 or 60 years of existence. It's pretty amazing to think that the New York Historical Society even in its venerability is a small player compared to some of the other museum structures. They were almost bankrupt several times. It took them a while to get established. At the same time, because of their genesis they weren't terribly welcoming to new immigrants to the city.

Sarah Pierce And therefore to including other stories, or histories?

Matthew Bakkom Possibly. That is where the Museum of the City of New York is born— by mostly Jewish American immigrants. The New York Historical Society existed on one side of central park, the Museum of the City of New York on the other. There is a politics involved in historical societies, like there is with museums, which is more contentious in the end than the public library, whose principle is to give all people an opportunity for an unspecialised, yet highly developed knowledge.

Sarah Pierce It seems the development of the library through philanthropic impulses is very much related to an American ideal of popular education.

Matthew Bakkom Well, this is speculative history, but at the same time that public libraries are founded, public schools in the US are developing. You can see this great educational public moment. The robber barons have made massive cash; they have cleaned up in post-frontier industrialisation, and for whatever reason choose to invest it in making education available to everyone.

Sarah Pierce So this big public movement came out of big private gestures?

Matthew Bakkom There's an exchange between the two. If you look at the Boards of Trustees and the people who are influential in education in the United States you will find this relationship between progressive ideas of access to education among people

who themselves have incredible access to wealth.

Sarah Pierce American philanthropy is predicated on an attitude that the rich will provide, not the state. Is the library about educating the masses, or it is about citizenship and a right to education? I like the idea that everyone goes to the library.

Matthew Bakkom In Europe and the United States, all you need to go into a public library is a piece of mail with your address on it.

Sarah Pierce Again, this locates an ethical system bound to the public library— we just don't behave this way in other parts of society. I can walk into a library, like I did recently in Ballymun, and walk out with as many books as I can carry with the understanding that *I will bring them back!* I expect a few people intentionally steal books.

Matthew Bakkom There are people who travel the country doing it. There have been famous cases. To me, people who intentionally steal books from public collections are pretty much, in a democratic society, committing one of the greatest crimes that can be committed against an inanimate object.

Sarah Pierce Have you ever been tempted to keep a book?

Matthew Bakkom No, but I think that in my particular case it's because I don't have that Benjaminian collector's gene. I'm thinking of his essay "Unpacking My Library," where you are building this thing that is your collection. I seem to be losing things that are in my collection.

Sarah Pierce Do you judge cities based on their libraries?

Matthew Bakkom The character of a city is clearly defined by its library. It's been borne out to me in Minneapolis, in New York, in Paris, in Dublin...

Sarah Pierce Copenhagen has a library called the Black Diamond. Do you know it?

Matthew Bakkom No, but that sounds good.

Sarah Pierce It's a the library as architecture. Very austere and ominous, kind of like a corporate headquarters. Black glass with no penetration through the windows from outside. A potent vessel filled with books. It feeds on the imagination. You can't help picturing its insides, even if you have never been inside, which many people in Copenhagen haven't. It a source of great civic pride.

Matthew Bakkom Coming from the upper mid-West in the United States where there is a Scandinavian influence, I think civic pride and educational pride is a vaguely cultural phenomenon.

Sarah Pierce In Dublin, I find the libraries oddly chaotic. The one in the Ilac Centre for instance.

Matthew Bakkom Ah yes, the Ilac.

Sarah Pierce Supposedly Trinity's library contains every book in print. The first library I ever visited in Dublin was the old library in Trinity above the *Book of Kells*, which is more like the library as artefact.

Matthew Bakkom It's a museum of a library.

Sarah Pierce Rather than one large public library, Dublin has lots of differentiated libraries scattered around the city. The Chester Beatty Library, which is built on a private collection of manuscripts and art from East Asia and the Middle East, the Marshes Library, which belonged to Jonathan Swift when he was Dean, the James Joyce library.

Matthew Bakkom They are all museum-space libraries. Especially Marshes where you get to experience what was an attraction to scholars in Dublin 200 and 300 years ago.

Sarah Pierce It would be interesting if there were cavernous rooms in museums where we could flip through an index of paintings, in the same way that you have an index of a book.

Matthew Bakkom Like Malraux's classic idea of the museum without walls. It's how photography becomes the library of the museum. The image of Malraux in front of a spread out of hundreds of images all directly relating to the index. What is interesting about museums having spaces that are more open to research is how that filters into contemporary practice.

Sarah Pierce Do you mean in the instance of the exhibition cum research area?

Matthew Bakkom Right, but often the artist's persona gets in the way of the actual operating of the space. People go to see the work of the artist instead of engaging with the material in any functional sense.

Sarah Pierce In the art world the library is quite sublimated through this idea of displaying the archive.

Matthew Bakkom The library is ultimately so vast in ways the art world isn't, no matter how these display systems imagine they might be. The library allows one to transmogrify into a synaptic impulse within the brain. This idea of just go-go-go...

Sarah Pierce Right. You can't help picking a book off the shelf, whereas the materials in many of these exhibitions remain untouched. It reminds me of the way museums and contemporary arts institutions deal with education, by marginalizing it within the organisation in this mode that is always bound to yet functioning outside of the exhibition. It is outward instruction as opposed to education as the collecting of knowledge or acquired information.

Matthew Bakkom There is some level of control within the library space, as to how a general collection is garnered, but it's such vast field that what becomes interesting is the idea of juxtaposition. This becomes the great engine rather than the qualitative judgement found in the museum. The notion in going to the library isn't that I am going to leave with 10 Grade A pieces of information. It's rather that I have the possibility of looking into the simultaneity of a physical space and coming up with some very important relationships.

Sarah Pierce In the library as the "reader" I determine as the value of those relationships. It's a post-modern moment... That is how some people might describe the Internet. What do you identify as differences between the

Internet and the library?

Matthew Bakkom There is no doubt the Internet is an incredible thing and I use it everyday for research and communication. The library holds different meaning, that includes the body and leaving the house. It is maybe going a little far to say it is like the difference between sex and pornography, but there is a way in which the Internet gives you the information in an instantaneous, perhaps addictive, but ultimately less satisfying form. I don't see what is wrong with either scenario. There is balance. You can't always go to the library. Earlier you mentioned this museum model that would have a library influence. What comes to mind is the possibility of a post-auratic museum and whether we are ready to be over the object. The book is an auratic object. It has an auratic nature that is different from the artwork, but that I find deeply pleasurable, the shape, the colour... It is a fetishizing for sure.

Sarah Pierce Something obviously missing from the Internet is a tangible, physical scale. When I pick up *War and Peace* I know it will take me a long time to read, and I also know when I am near the end. With the Internet, I sometimes miss that basic sense of "The End." How does the library as a system for organising loads of information differ from the Internet?

Matthew Bakkom The amount of visual information that you can get from the printed page in a bound book in a library far exceeds what the Internet can deliver. Related to your idea of indexing, I am just as interested in the book next to the book that I am looking for. In the book next to the book I have discovered more than I have ever found in a key word data search on the Internet. The Internet is not organised like the Dewey Decimal system. The joy of going to the index system of the library you are in and looking up the key word, author, title, whatever is finding the neighbourhood of the knowledge you are interested in.

Sarah Pierce Is there anything in the contrivances of the library that you find irritating or negative?

Matthew Bakkom I am such a true fan. I have concerns about what is happening with libraries but I am an impossible witness because there is no objective value in what I have to say. There are disturbing trends that have to do with consumer culture and service-based culture which is confusing the relationship to knowledge that the library offers. Librarians are increasingly treated like clerks of video stores and they're not. They are public servants who are highly educated. Librarians are the tip of the iceberg, you could talk about public school teachers and a load of others who get treated and compensated according to a differential that leads to bitterness. People want service from the library in the way that they want service from fast food restaurants or other consumer environments.

Sarah Pierce Do you think that our relationship to the librarian was more expansive 20 years ago?

Matthew Bakkom It's not a matter of nostalgia. I just think there is a tension. My relationship to librarians has been fantastic, but I respect the position, and I'm courteous. Going to

the library when you are in a hurry is a bad choice. That's when you should go to the Internet, the bookstore, or a place where you can get in and get out. The library is about a different relationship to "place" than a consumer might have. Imagine if we could develop its systems for borrowing automobiles and tools.

Sarah Pierce God, that would be great. To enter a warehouse and say, "I need to borrow a car this weekend. I'll bring it back Monday."

Matthew Bakkom Why not? It would be amazing way to share different levels of resource.

Sarah Pierce In looking around your studio at the different equipment I realise that there is no public free place to borrow a tripod for instance, but this first edition of Le Courbousier's *Modular 2*, which is a much more specialised a tool if you will, you picked up for free at the Ilac Centre library. It's more rare, more valuable and difficult to replace than the tripod.

Matthew Bakkom It brings to mind the idea that the library is this not so secretive cooperative model that seems to have survived.

Sarah Pierce It is replicated in every country, city, town.

Matthew Bakkom It works. There is a belief that people who know more might actually be happier, be able to function and share with each other better and the planet might be a better place— we all might be better off if education was emphasized and made possible for people of all different levels of income.

Sarah Pierce Do you feel that the population that uses libraries is dying down?

Matthew Bakkom It's a city by city issue. The library that I came of age in, in Minneapolis, was torn down last year. There is no library there right now. They are building a new Caesar Pelli library. Of course, when you tear down a place and it is gone for a year or two it leaves its status a little up in the air.

Sarah Pierce Building a new library seems to tap into our collective sense of optimism and good will. Yet, they are expensive endeavours to maintain.

Matthew Bakkom In the US the funding is going down and the reason is that there is a perception is that usage is not relevant politically.

Sarah Pierce Kids and immigrants don't make for a big vote, and the rest of the population can but their own books from Amazon...

Matthew Bakkom It's sometimes that cynical. Libraries are competing with commercial culture on a head to head basis, except that nobody puts any real amounts of money into promoting public libraries, which is what drives people's interest. A large amount of library use does not directly affect the stock market in the way that using the Internet does. The Internet is a consumer outlet.

Sarah Pierce The public library has embraced the Internet as a resource. A fundamental idea is that somewhere, somehow information should be free and open. People need to know. I got that

from the *X-files*.

Matthew Bakkom Sharing information is a great privilege of human beings, whether it is five people, or ten or a whole society.

Sarah Pierce Based on the idea that the papers in this series are conversational, I have an interest in what is said between people and how that starts to gain meaning in the public realm. Print is all about legislation, copyright, censorship— all litigious topics that affect my right to choose and access different types of information freely. Have you ever come across fascist materials in the libraries you've visited?

Matthew Bakkom No, librarians are pretty thorough. There are certainly books or collections in libraries that are difficult or hard to contextualise in a totally positive way. In some ways it is an ethical decision. Remember the notion of the library includes an idea of the "public," that is not about a fractured field of "privates."

Sarah Pierce Back to your idea that the worst crime against public space in a democratic situation is stealing from the public library, the librarian is a ward of a civil agreement that involves printed words. Is there a censorship in what is available?

Matthew Bakkom There are different libraries that contain different things that the average public library will not have.

Sarah Pierce So as far as fascist libraries are concerned?

Matthew Bakkom I'd like to think that there aren't any fascist libraries. Well, in fact, I'm sure there probably are but it doesn't sound right that fascists maintain big public libraries. It just doesn't ring true with what I know about fascism.

Sarah Pierce Public libraries aren't part of the fascist agenda.

Matthew Bakkom Clearly not.

Matthew Bakkom is an artist based in Minneapolis. Through the use of a broad range of tools and strategies he engages notions of history, spectacle, pleasure, and investigation. He is currently participating in the Irish Museum of Modern Art's Artist Work Programme in Dublin.

The Metropolitan Complex is a project by Sarah Pierce. It organises a social practice around a range of activities such as exhibitions, talks, and publications. These structures often open up to the personal and the incidental.

This is Paper No. 5 in a series of discussions published by The Metropolitan Complex that circulate as free publications.

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