

Preserving process

The Peter Lyssiotis Archive

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The Artists' Books Collection in the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne comprises an extensive array of works by both Australian and international artists. The Baillieu Library has in some cases also acquired associated drafts and support materials in the form of artists' archives. These materials, collected with the intention of demonstrating the various stages of making an artist's book, often provide precious insights into artists' lives and work practices.

I was recently given the opportunity to work in the Artists' Books Collection, as part of the University Library's 2013 Cultural Collections Projects Program. The project involved organising, rehousing and listing the working archives of Melbourne-based artist Peter Lyssiotis. These materials have been donated to the university by the artist over a number of years and consist of support materials directly related to the creation of individual works in the Artists' Books Collection. The primary aim of my project was to aid the long-term preservation and accessibility of the collection. This article is written with the intention of increasing awareness of the archive and promoting its use as a research tool.

The physical traces of artists' working processes are commonly

confined to the privacy of the work space or studio. Finished artworks, works in progress, support materials and documentation co-inhabit these spaces, offering evidence of artistic practice. While the aura of the artist's studio cannot easily be transferred to the reading room of a public or university library, traces of the artistic process can, through the portability and accessibility of archives.

Artists' archives generally contain items relating to an artist's life and practice. Because the majority of the materials in these collections have originated from studios or work spaces, these documents can give us a greater understanding of the artist, their work practices and oeuvre. In addition to assisting investigations into provenance, attribution and artist intention, these materials can enrich our general experience of an artist's work. While the archives of deceased artists may preserve their memory or legacy, for living, working artists such as Lyssiotis, archives act as a memory bank, where ideas can be revisited and recycled for new works.

Peter Lyssiotis was born in Cyprus in 1949 and emigrated to Melbourne as a young boy. While his work has taken on many artistic forms—such as writing, photography and film—over the course of his career, it is through his artist's books and their

integration of image and text that he is most widely known. By juxtaposing fragments collected from the external world against his own poetic and artistic sensibilities, Lyssiotis constructs and communicates powerful new narratives and meanings.

For Lyssiotis, the line between finished work and draft is often blurred. In addition to appropriating content from news media, magazines, literature, music and art, the artist regularly borrows from his own works, regenerating previous ideas to form something new. In recent correspondence he stated:

I tend to view the 'process' as being alive as long as you are alive ... and I am not sure of any work being entirely 'finished' even on a simple level: images/projects/work may 'grow' out of a finished work ... and when they will sprout is up to them not you.¹

This revisiting of ideas is evident in the university's holdings. Two works, *First there is a mountain* and *Views from the mountain*, while unique in layout and imagery, share much of the same textual information. The two books, both made in 2009, are variations on the

Peter Lyssiotis and Theo Strasser, *Eyewitness* (detail), Melbourne: T. Strasser & P. Lyssiotis, 2008. Shown with Peter Lyssiotis, exercise book depicting similar imagery (detail), 2008. Peter Lyssiotis Archive, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

one theme. While *First there is a mountain* is made up of both text and imagery by Lyssiotis, *Views from the mountain* was made in collaboration with visual artist Ilse van Garderen. By comparing the artist's proofs it is clear to see where Lyssiotis's text has been appropriated and modified

between works (illustrated on p. 42). In *Views from the mountain*, one page reads: "Take care" gurgles the bony carp, "to kill you all I have to do is close my eyes and sleep for a hundred years". In *First there is a mountain*, the character of the carp is replaced by a raven but the remainder of the

narrative remains the same: "Take care," gurgles the bony raven, "to kill you all I have to do is close my eyes and sleep for a hundred years". This close duplication of text is continued throughout these two works, and is indicative of the open and regenerative nature of Lyssiotis's artistic practice.



Right: Peter Lyssiotis, *First there is a mountain*, artist's proof (detail) for book published in Melbourne by Masterthief in 2009. Shown with Peter Lyssiotis and Ilse van Garderen, *Views from the mountain*, artist's proof (detail) for book published in Melbourne by Masterthief in 2009. Peter Lyssiotis Archive, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Below: Peter Lyssiotis, exercise book containing artist's writing alongside fabric swatches for binding, 2008. Peter Lyssiotis Archive, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



Through close examination and comparison of materials in the archive we can engage with the working processes of the artist. We are invited to witness the care and consideration that Lyssiotis and his collaborators invest in every element of a work's construction, from first draft to final publication, while the various materials and documents held in the archive further strengthen our understanding of the completed works. Although the archive contains visual references such as photographs, illustrations, prints, fabric swatches and imagery acquired from mass media, the majority of the archive is made up of page after page of the artist's poetic texts. Many of these are handwritten: notes, annotations and edits are scribbled throughout. They are often written in the first person and it is here that the hand and mind of the artist are perhaps most evident. Many drafts are rewritten several times, each consecutive version one step closer to the published text.

The Peter Lyssiotis Archive at the University of Melbourne is an ongoing and growing acquisition. As the artist's oeuvre expands, so too will the archive. By choosing to contribute to the Baillieu Library's collection through inclusion of both his published works and the

working archive, Lyssiotis has a hand in shaping his own legacy. In doing this the artist hopes to help dispel the popular conception that art is born through 'sudden enlightenment' or 'divine imagination'.² By making evidence of his creative processes available to the public, Lyssiotis allows a more complete appreciation of his artistic practice, serving as a powerful reminder of the hard work, dedication and passion that go into producing great art.

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Materials from the Peter Lyssiotis Archive are part of **Special Collections in the Baillieu Library**, and can be requested through the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the third floor of the Baillieu Library, using an online request form at www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/orderform/.

- 1 Peter Lyssiotis, personal communication with the author, June 2014.
- 2 Lyssiotis, personal communication.

