

ART REVIEW | WESTCHESTER

An Old Technology, Transformed

By Susan Hodara

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On a recent afternoon, Carla Rae Johnson riffled through an array of cards in one of the narrow wooden drawers of a card catalog at the Greenburgh Public Library. But she wasn't doing research, and the cards she was examining had nothing to do with books. She was inspecting her installation, the "Alternet," a 50-drawer card catalog that she repurposed to hold more than 15,000 three-by-five-inch works of original visual art.

The "Alternet" is one of three side-by-side installations that make up "Artists in the Archives: A Collection of Card Catalogs," an exhibition that revitalizes library tools rendered obsolete by digital technology in the mid-1990s. Each installation includes a card catalog filled with art: the "Alternet" consists of works by 75 artists, "Book Marks" is the creation of a single artist, and "The Call to Everyone" contains contributions by several hundred members of the public.

"The Call to Everyone," a work in progress, was conceived by JoAnne Wilcox, a photographer who lives in Westville, Conn. She invited the public to take cellphone photographs and then, following her detailed instructions, print them onto selections from her collection of now-antiquated cards and submit them to the project. To date, she has accumulated about 1,000 pieces (including her own), which she has randomly interspersed in a 25-drawer catalog among multitudes of as-yet-unadorned, cream-colored cards.

In one of those drawers, Ms. Wilcox located an image of an elderly, gnarled hand resting on the lime-green fabric of a dress. The words showing through the photograph announced the card's former life in the catalog: the author, "Read, Piers Paul"; the book, "Alive."



"The Altnet," by Carla Rae Johnson, holds more than 15,000 pieces of original work. Carla Rae Johnson

“My neighbor shot this of her grandmother, who is a Holocaust survivor,” Ms. Wilcox, 42, said. “How beautiful is it that she paired her with the title ‘Alive’?”

She opened a different drawer and took out another piece — a pair of scruffy brown shoes on the card for Jonathan Kellerman’s “Victims,” the words “SUSPENSE FICTION” typed across the top.

“People choose cards that appeal to them,” Ms. Wilcox said, “and the images they juxtapose with the words create something new. Each card tells its own tale.”

The cards in the “Altnet” also tell tales, these intended to reflect daily acts of creativity. In late 2011, Ms. Johnson, of Peekskill, asked dozens of artists to spend a year developing projects using 300 cards. The results include narratives, abstractions, political statements, historical contemplations and journalistic musings presented through drawings, paintings, collages, photographs, found materials, computer-generated imagery and text. Each set is displayed in a designated card catalog drawer.

The 50-drawer card catalog of "The Alternet" includes work by 75 artists. JoAnne Wilcox

Charles McGill, of Peekskill, produced a commentary on racial stereotyping, with card after card of statements like "My name was never Shaft or Black Caesar" and "I have never wanted straight hair."

Victoria M. Zeph, of Kent Cliffs (and the chef at Zeph's Restaurant in Peekskill), filled her drawer with photographs she took of clothes drying on clotheslines. "Clotheslines are a fitting subject for a card catalog," Ms. Johnson, 66, said. "You don't see many of either anymore."

Equally rare are the library "due date" cards in the third installation, "Book Marks," that Barbara Page, an artist who lives near Ithaca, embellished with drawings, rubber stamps and collage elements. The finished pieces depict her memories of the books that the cards once occupied. On the card for Françoise Gilot's "Life With Picasso," for instance, Ms. Page stamped the image of a lone paintbrush amid lists of old dates. She stamped the card for Eric Carle's "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" with red strawberries eaten away by hole-punched holes.

So far, Ms. Page, 69, has made approximately 500 cards, for books including the Bible and "Fahrenheit 451."

Cards from "Book Marks." Barbara Page.

"I didn't love all the books, but they all made an impression on me," she said. "The cards hold bits of those impressions. The role of memory is incredibly important in this piece."

At the library, "Book Marks" is enclosed in a glass case, with 50 cards laid out on shelves alongside a two-drawer card catalog that contains the rest of Ms. Page's collection. The cards are arranged in the order she read the books, and as such, she considers the project both a personal history and a cultural time line. "I realized this wasn't just a way to catalog books I've read," she said, "but a way of looking at the evolution of our society over the last 60 years."

In addition to evoking a touch of nostalgia, "Artists in the Archives" underscores the importance of curiosity and serendipity. For one thing, the artwork is mostly in drawers. "You have to be curious enough to go over and browse through them," Ms. Johnson said.

She likened the act of flipping through the catalogs to a Google search. "But online it's no longer a tactile, kinesthetic experience," she said. "In the cards, there was more of a sense of discovery."

That discovery is key for Ms. Wilcox. "I want people to wander," she said, "to stumble upon something they didn't expect."