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A Prank and Its Possibilities



In the course of everyday life, in order to survive and prosper individuals mix with groups, interact with institutions, negotiate with corporations, and navigate through bureaucracies. The experience of artists, entrepreneurs, and activists offers insight into these processes. The success and failure of their pursuits is affected by their competency in communication, and perhaps most importantly, their communication. In my work, I learn from the performances and interactions like [Temporary Services](#), a Chicago based art collaboration that attempts to temporarily alter or subvert “business as usual,” and to promote more ethical

relations between people and organizations.

By taking a close look at Temporary Services’ work [The Library Project](#), I tell the story of how an art project challenge an institution’s authority operates both as a gift and as a threat. I show how, in the space of the possibility for creative relationships—outside the typical channels and manner of communication—is

In 2001, artists [Brett Bloom](#), [Salem Collo-Julin](#), and Marc Fischer, the core group that makes up Temporary Services enlisted the help of over 50 artists and art groups to construct 100 artists’ books that were “donated” to the [Washington Library Center](#) (HWLC) in Chicago in a covert act of artistic intervention. By manufacturing replicated those used by the HWLC, Temporary Services’ made the books look like they already belonged. Because the library security checked for books leaving the library—not those entering—it was relatively easy for Temporary Services to smuggle the books into the library and shelve them in places the artists had selected.

The goal of this action, according to [Marc Fischer](#), was to create “new juxtapositions of materials not normally common library practice,” while “bringing obscure, subversive, self-published, handmade, or limited edition underexposed artists to a wider audience” (Fischer par. 3). Temporary Services perceived a problem with libraries’ order books and the implications for how we value certain ways of knowing. Particularly, they critiqued the HWLC’s practice of concentrating and isolating artists’ books—books that are themselves works of visual art—behind closed doors. Why not, they ask, shelve an artist book like Hans-Peter Feldmann’s *Die Toten*, which contains photographs of the victims of terrorism in Germany, next to other non-artist books about extremist groups who practiced terrorism in Germany (Fischer par. 17)? Why not let the authors decide which section of the library will “provide the strongest experience of their work” (Fischer par. 22)?



The most compelling aspect of The Library Project is how the prank wavers between a threat and a gift, an oscillation that is accomplished through the language of “gifts,” “giving,” and “donation” that Temporary Services uses to describe the project in a [zine](#) they produced. Additionally, the project takes shape through the on-going interactions and conversations that occur as the books are discovered in the library’s official holdings, and eventually put on display by the library. I draw from communication scholar [Harold’s insightful work on culture jamming and prankster art](#) to argue that The Library Project is an excellent rhetorical strategy I call “pranking as gifting.” Pranking as gifting critiques the library, perhaps to change its real payoff is the invention of creative relationships among Temporary Services, the library, and the patrons. As The Library Project shows, pranking as gifting extends prankster art beyond the initial covert act, bringing artists, librarians, and patrons into conversation with one another.



The covert tactics of sneaking the books into the library had the potential to challenge the rigid us/them dichotomy between the institution and the artists, a relationship characterized by asymmetrical power relations. By working outside the normal



communication between the library and its patrons, Temporary Services r library on the defensive, forcing it to tighten security and/or cleanse the l disorder. Further, by providing the public with an example and detailed in how to pull off such a prank at this and other libraries, The Library Projec kind of [Anarchist Cookbook](#), a looming threat to the powers that be.

However, this sharp edge is dulled in a few key ways. First, Temporary Services used the rhetoric of gift zine, arguing that the prank should not be viewed "as an act of aggression" (Fischer par. 6); rather, the think of it as a "massive gift" worth in excess of \$1000 (Fischer par. 20). Second, Temporary Services : library's discourse and values in order to position themselves as allies to the library. They did this by us HWLC as the cover of the zine, and by including the [HWLC's mission statement](#) and the "[Library Bill of f](#) zine. In Christine Harold's terms, Temporary Services augmented the library's maps and documents wit Services logo and aesthetic, and they folded the library's mission statement in a way that aligned The L with the goals of the library. The zine provides a rhetorical frame through which to view the action. It d with traditional argument, but also with the performative enactment of friendliness and the dressing of clothes of the library.

Lastly, The Library Project, as an example of pranking as gifting, works because of the conversations th continue to occur since the prank was executed. For example, in the Fall of 2006, Temporary Services r scene of the prank with a group of students. In anticipation of their arrival, HWLC librarians created a l some of the captured books. The librarians expressed excitement about the project and a desire to find books. The conversations among the students, the artists, the librarians, and indeed even among comn scholars like me, show that a prank can be a gift that continues to give. By using "pranking as gifting," ambiguous move that unsettles the expected relations proposed by strategies of control, Temporary Se the HWLC creatively, producing a space where unique and intimate relations among Temporary Service and the library's patrons are now possible.

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