

# Did Frank O'Hara Go?

## David Senior interviewed by Maja Wismer

New York / Basel, October 2015

**Maja Wismer:** You are a bibliographer at the library of the Museum of Modern Art, one of the leading resources for anyone researching Western art of the 20th century. What does your work consist of?

**David Senior:** The library is a historical collection with publications that trace the history of modernism, but we also try to keep the collection relevant in the contemporary context. So my job is twofold: to work with the historical collection, and to keep building the collection, especially by working directly with contemporary artists, designers and small publishers that are making innovative new publications.

**MW:** Does MoMA collect what I call, for lack of a better term, "digital ephemera"? In other words, is an exhibition like your very well-received exhibition *Please Come to the Show*, which you curated in 2013 and which traveled from MoMA to Liverpool, where in 2014 it was on view at the Exhibition Research Centre, still imaginable twenty years from now?

**DS:** This is a really good question, and I think it's something we're struggling with. So much of what we work with gets transmitted via electronic email invite or even via Facebook, and many archivists and librarians are not quite sure what to do with this material. The current situation creates a heavy dependency on people who know how to manage digital storage and technology, whereas that's not my specialization at all. It makes us rely on external providers of technical support. This often puts a librarian and an archivist in a strange place, in having to speak in a language that they're maybe not trained in. I can, of course, save a PDF of all the invitations I get via email, but where does this ultimately go? What context would be best to save it according to archival standards? Printing something is still sort of the state of the art [in terms of archival best practices], which seems ridiculous. At MoMA,

we work with the libraries of the Brooklyn Art Museum and the Frick, we collaborate on archiving websites to document how a website changes over time, and I could see that being used for artists who use their websites or other sites as their location to speak with an audience, whereas maybe a poster or a card is how they would have done it in the past. But it's still a completely open question to which people have many different answers. I haven't heard one yet that is as simple as putting an invitation card in a folder and putting the folder on a shelf.

**MW:** And the other way round, I suppose. How can people access these records?

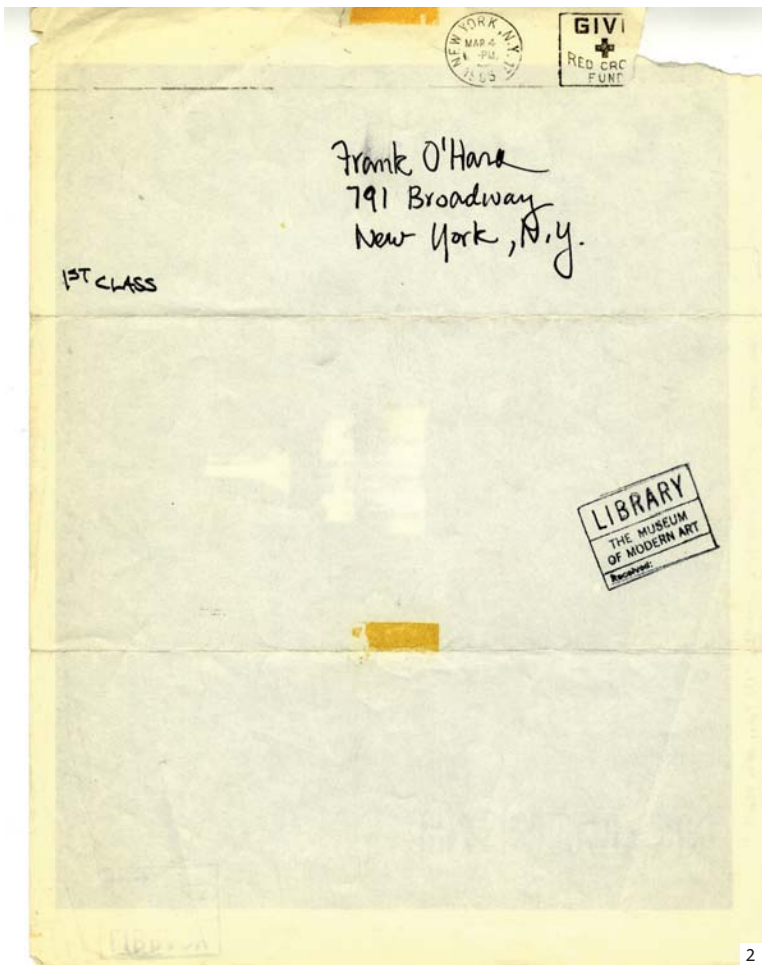
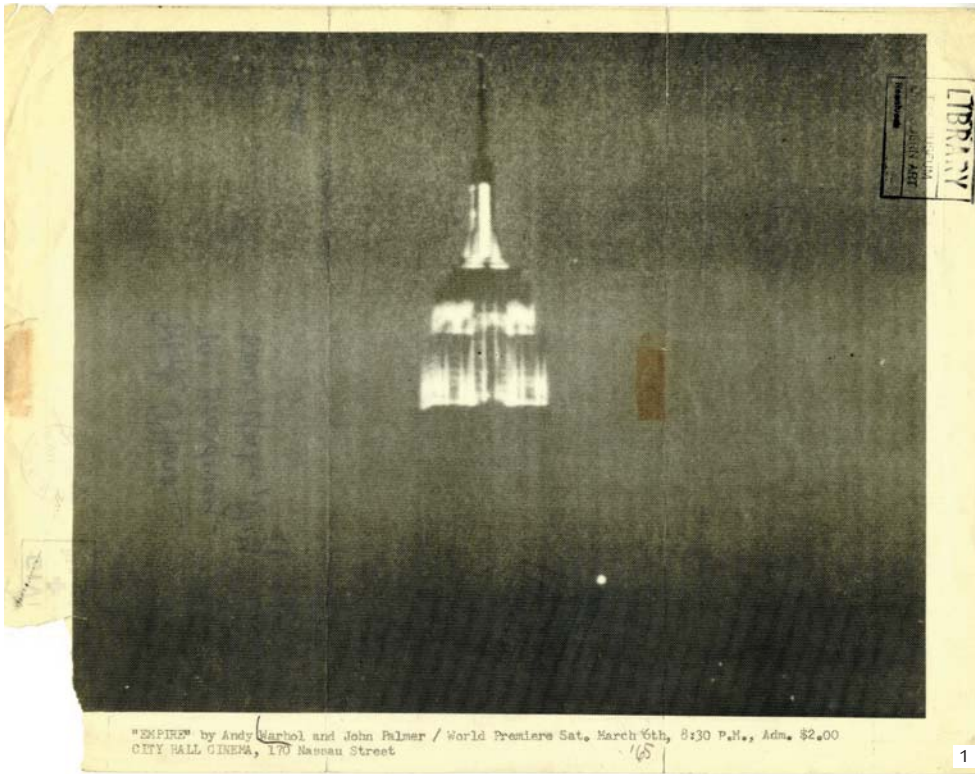
**DS:** It's interesting to see libraries developing themselves as digital sites that link to other digital sites rather than being a repository where things are kept. This is definitely a paradigm change.

**MW:** I've noticed it to be a recent trend among bibliographers or librarians to curate exhibitions or programs. Do you agree, and why do you think there might be such a trend?

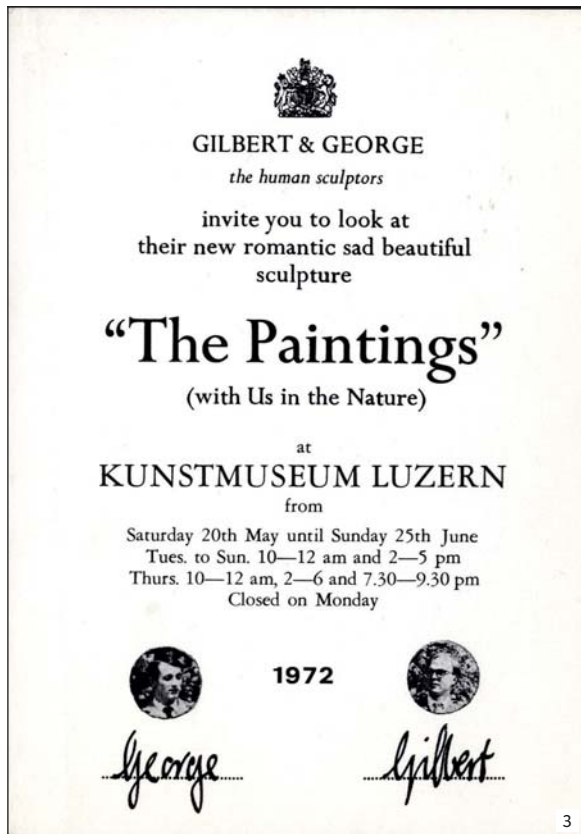
**DS:** Do you mean with contemporary material or with historical documents?

**MW:** Either or—it seems that there is this tendency of a profession that traditionally acts rather behind the scenes instead becoming visible. Maybe providing links for an audience is a sort of curation?

**DS:** I think so. Currently, there is a lot of thinking in the curatorial world about different narratives and about different voices and objects that can tell different stories about an artist's practice or about a setting like an art space or, most importantly, how networks of people communicated across space—like, for example, through something like an avant-garde journal. With a periodical, where a lot of



people were participating, you can show sort of a snapshot of a network, and in terms of curatorial practice this is one strategy to expand a story beyond the white cube. I think this is currently done with things that happened in the 1960s and 1970s, when the locus of the work could be a score or an instruction that was printed and then sent out to, for example, possible performers. In that case, publications and little ephemera objects become a source for curation.



**MW:** What you just described is what has become a method to thematize contextual information on art through artists' ephemera as documents—I think that this might be a legacy we owe to conceptual art practices. Do you see reasons for the current interest in artists' ephemera other than their status as historical documents?

**DS:** I think that there is a certain romance with the actual object, with the directness of the medium. Informal printed matter can be employed as an anecdote within a more formal gallery setting—it adds a bit of warmth maybe? From my perspective at least, the informality makes a curatorial concept more approachable and interesting.

**MW:** Including ephemera in, for example, the presentation of a collection can help to communicate a certain tone of an era.

**DS:** Tone is a good word. When I was working with the collection here at the museum to prepare the exhibition *Please Come to the Show*, some of the works that were really resonating with me were invitations or posters that had a little note from the artist. We have collections from Lucy Lippard in the ephemera collection, and there was one by the artist David Wojnarowicz to Lucy Lippard very early in his career saying, "I really hope you can make it, David." Knowing that artist's back story and the fact that he died of AIDS at a very young age, or more generally even, that he was a young artist trying to get people's attention, has an emotive quality that is intriguing. The poet Frank O'Hara worked here [MoMA] in the '60s and the invitation to the premiere of Andy Warhol's *Empire* in our collection is addressed to him. The simple idea of that piece of paper arriving in Frank O'Hara's mailbox opens up this imaginary scene that you can play out: Did Frank O'Hara go? Is the address that was written on the back of the card in Warhol's handwriting? Aside from the graphic nature of the things themselves, that's part of it for me: the hands that handled it.

**MW:** When curating an exhibition, do you think that your approach as a bibliographer differs from the one a curator would take?

**DS:** Yes. In a very clear-cut way, in that library exhibitions in the museum don't have the same resources as the regular program. So it's kind of like making a scrappy little exhibition within MoMA. We don't have a lot of space, and it's a little separate from the main exhibition building, so it's definitely a space apart. In a way this gives you a lot more independence, and I like that a lot; it has allowed me to do the exhibitions that I've done. But there's also a sense that it's not totally a part of the main agenda of the curatorial program.

**MW:** I was assuming that recent interest in archival documents has changed the status of your department within the institution.

**DS:** It definitely has. Nowadays a lot more books, ephemera, and archival documents are appearing in the regular exhibition program, sort of feeding into how the curators are displaying monographic shows. There is, for example, a show right now of early Gilbert & George works that features a



huge amount of library material. There is also presently a show of art from Latin America and Eastern Europe from the 1960s and 1970s that has a lot of library and archive representation. Even in the past, when there have been shows about the Bauhaus or about early abstraction, a significant amount of material was drawn from the library. In these cases, we basically take a support role in the larger exhibition program.

**MW:** For quite some time, ephemera—which had been left out of major museum collections—are now being integrated. I think we talked about reasons why. Do you think this is a fortunate situation?

**DS:** It's interesting in terms of these other spheres of influence. One is curatorial interest in specific art historical moments in which these things play a larger role. I think that there's a shifting of the reception of the historical window of the 1960s and 1970s; it is now a sort of a new, canonized era for historical shows. And I think that's part of the reason why it's being recognized that one of the ways to tell this narrative is through printed matter, whether it be Fluxus, or things coming from Seth Siegelaub, or the importance of ephemera and posters in telling the story of the history of performance. What can be shown from the Judson Dance Theatre? There's not much of a moving-image record, so the posters or other programs from these events become even more important and allow a graphic representation of an event that curators are trying to recreate in all sorts of ways. The other sphere is the art market. There are things that have become less accessible for our collection. Like Martin Kippenberger's posters or even some of his books—they are unbelievably expensive and have become part of the curatorial departments' domain.

**MW:** Since your tenure at MoMA, has an object that was originally kept among your files been recognized as an artwork instead and therefore been moved into another category, and consequently to another department?

**DS:** Yes. The postcard project by Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots*. We had a copy of it, but the photo department did not. And we had more than one copy, so we gave them a set of that work. That's an example of some sort of a cross-departmental collaboration, of us sharing.

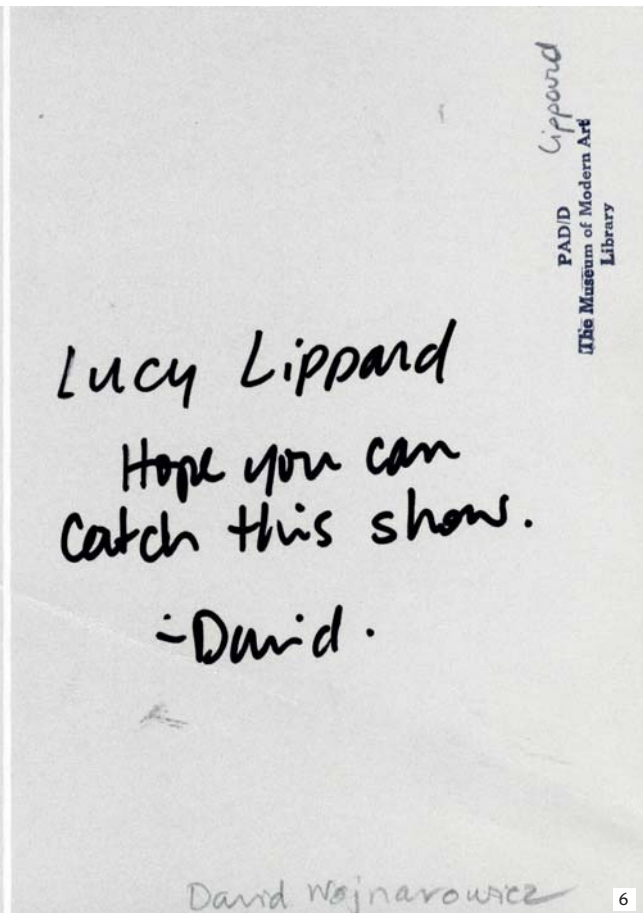
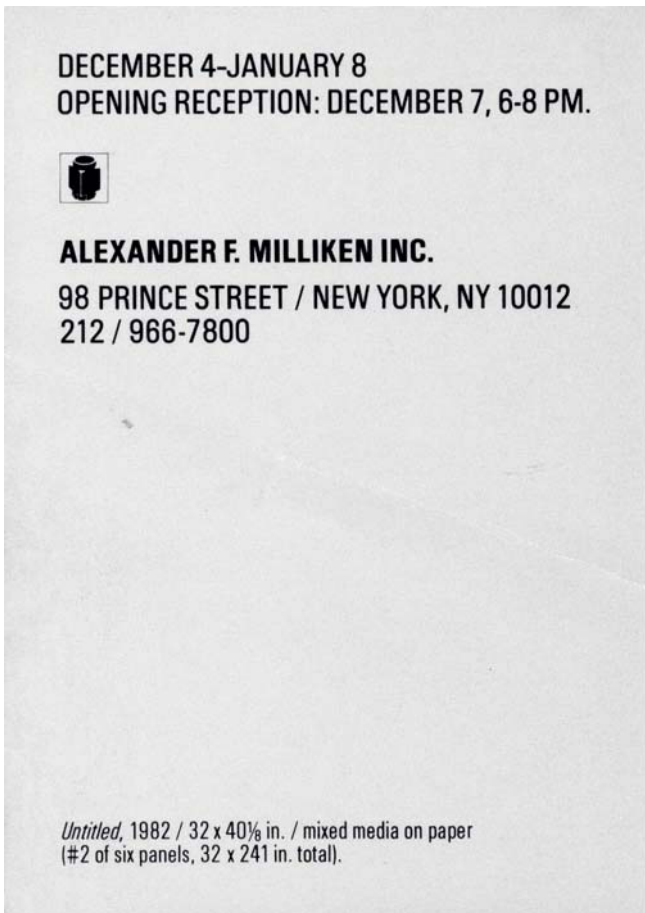
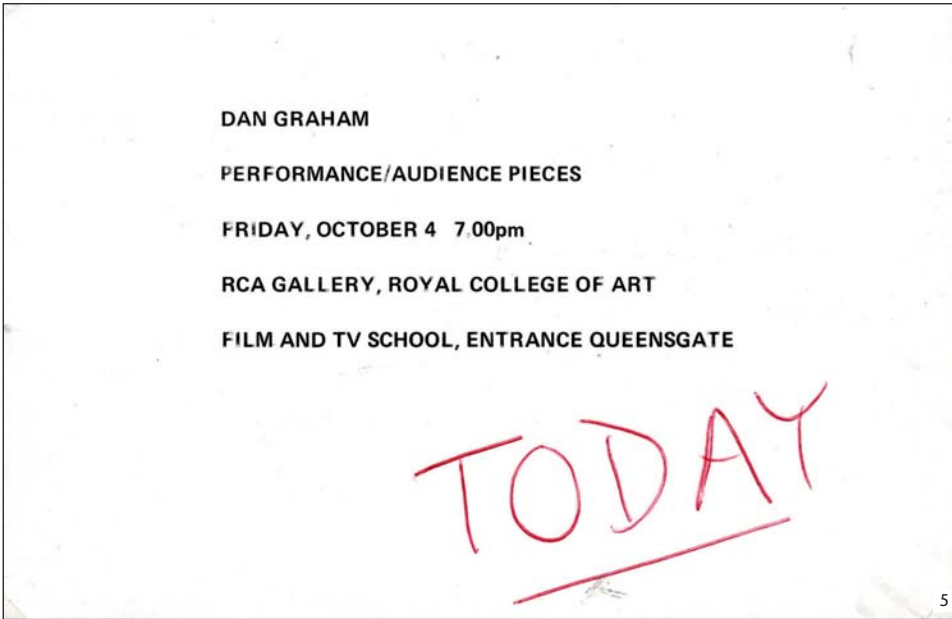


**MW:** Or have objects just become too valuable according to market value for storage conditions at the library?

**DS:** Yes, and if things get very fragile, we hand them to another department. At MoMA, the library has very specific overlaps with the Drawings and Prints Department and with Christophe Chérix and David Platzker who are the specialists in this field. But we also have a lot of overlap with the Architecture and Design Department. Especially with regard to posters. Within the museum, the poster has slipped through the cracks of the Prints Department and the Design Department and the library. The Design Department has a huge amount of posters in their collection, but they don't collect in the same way as we do. They collect individual works rather than, like us, simply getting things from galleries and, as they arrive, putting them in folders.

**MW:** Do you have to accept everything that comes into the library? Do you select? Might this be another differentiation between your job and that of a curator?

**DS:** We don't have an infinite budget, and we don't have infinite space. So some choices have to be made. But I definitely differentiate what I do from curating. At the New York Art Book Fair, for exam-



ple, the work of a huge variety of people is shown, and it is my job to acquire a representation of the spectrum. I think that's the difference, to collect in a way that represents what is being produced now, while also having some relation to things that already exist within the curatorial departments and that lie within the scope of the museum itself. And we collect what comes in [as gifts or exchanges from other institutions and galleries]: anything from exhibition catalogues and monographs to gallery publications and artists' books and invitations. Strangely this has become a larger volume now than even ten years ago, which seems counterintuitive...

**MW:** Could that be due to the fact that MoMA's library has become visible as an acting department with a public visibility?

**DS:** We definitely think of what we do [with library exhibitions and the digital presence] as part of our outreach to get people to know that we're here. The agenda of my colleagues here is that the library only makes sense if researchers are using it. So there's always an idea that what we do helps make us relevant to people not just in New York but also to an international audience.

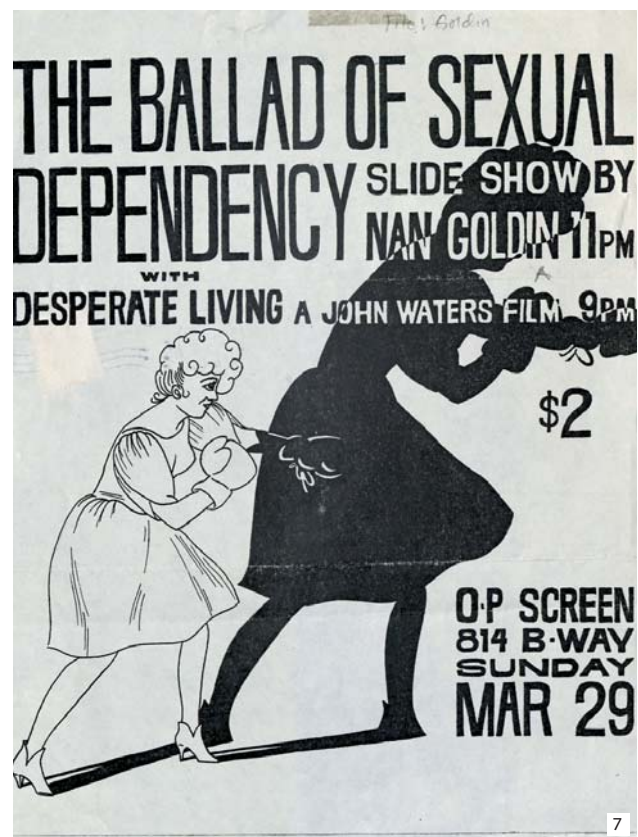
**MW:** You also serve on the board of the publishing initiative Primary Information. What's your relationship to the printed document apart from a certain nostalgia?

**DS:** Primary Information is going through a record of books that were relevant to the history of conceptual art or the history of artists' books. They find titles that had been out of print and are seeking to make them available and to distribute them at an accessible price rather than treating them like rare scarce things. Their motive is to realign them with the original intention: to circulate an object cheaply.

**MW:** Their website is indeed a very generous resource. On the one side, there is this struggle with what to collect from contemporary production—we talked about the unsolved archiving questions—and on the other side, it seems to me that the real asset of digital possibilities within the field of ephemera seems to be the possibility of bringing the documents to desktops all over.

**DS:** I think there's no idea that's replacing the original document. But yes, it's allowing us to circulate in a different way. I started a Tumblr page for the museum library and just put things up that were

newly acquired or things I chose from the collection. This page became very well followed, and it became very clear that these things are of interest to someone somewhere. Our Tumblr site now has 250,000 followers. It wasn't a project that was branded or advertised, it was just a person at his computer in the library putting stuff up and hoping that he wouldn't get in trouble. It's interesting how minor gestures like this one can exist in this space and become a part of what we do and how we communicate with the world. The paradoxical situation that this printed information has another life in digital frameworks, being reblogged and shared, is really interesting, especially with the invitation cards and posters whose primary intent was to be just passed around.



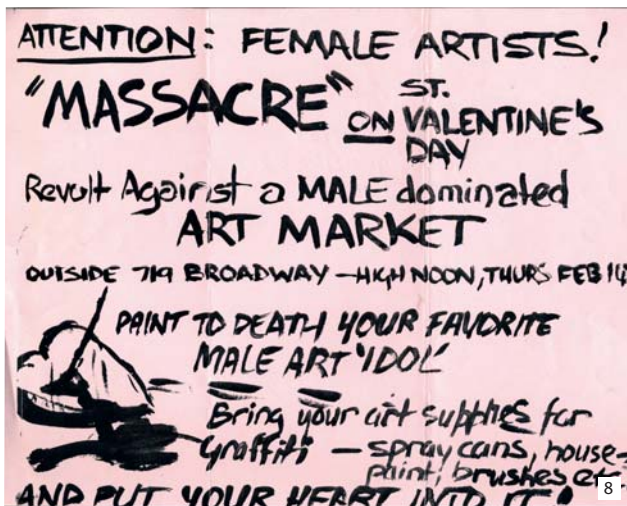
**MW:** This is something that occurred to me -, most of these objects have been distributed into the wider world through the mail. But then they become part of MoMA's collection, so does MoMA hold the copyright?

**DS:** That's another way to differentiate the library from curatorial collections: when researchers come, they can take scans of all the books and documents and it's up to the researchers to figure out a way to publish them. I'm really interested in this second life of our materials,, especially to initiatives



like Primary Information who often scan our material and find ways of republishing it. Meanwhile, museums are trying to figure out how to maintain their ownership of images of objects in their collections.

**MW:** As a last question—MoMA does write history, what is shown there is considered to be of relevance. Is this statement applicable to the realm of artists' ephemera as well?



**DS:** There was a director here, Clive Phillpot, who was interested and connected to artists who publish, first in London and then in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. He was working alongside people that were making things and organizations that were helping distribute them, like Printed Matter in New York. I think that Clive definitely helped construct a narrative of how artists' publications were discussed and established a terminology used to identify things within that genre. In the current context, however, I think that a new terminology needs to be defined and thought about. It seems to me that in terms of the current tendency of artists' publishing, the engagement with graphic design is different and a more complex matrix. It's more about designers and artists joining for a collaborative experience. We're trying to document this tendency. This connects to how, in previous times, marginal things would have been collected at the library prior to curatorial departments thinking about these artists or designers. Often these works could enter the museum through the library first. And I think when I engage with younger artists now, there's an ease with which I can collect things in comparison to the procedure of how a younger artist's work would be considered for the collection. This is particularly true for artists that make books and use them in a way to produce



works, or to have first interactions with a public. The printed page is still another kind of alternative space for artists who are disinclined to engage directly with a gallery market, or just want to create a space completely on their own terms.

### Captions

- 1,2 Andy Warhol and John Palmer, *Empire*, front and back of a flyer for the first screening, New York, 1965.
- 3 Gilbert & George, *The Paintings (with Us in the Nature)*, Lucerne, Switzerland: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1972.
- 4 Flyer for *Artists for Survival*. New York: ABC No Rio, 1980.
- 5 Dan Graham, *Performance/ Audience Pieces*, London: Royal College of Art 1974.
- 6 David Wojnarowicz, with inscription to Lucy Lippard, New York: Alexander F. Milliken, 1982.
- 7 Nan Goldin, *Ballad of Sexual Dependency Slide Show*, New York, 1981.
- 8 *Massacre on St. Valentine's Day*, New York: Liberty, Equality and Freedom for Female Artists, 1985.
- 9 Angie Keefer: *An Exhibition*, Portland, Yale Union (YU), 2013.

**David Senior** is the bibliographer at the Museum of Modern Art Library, where he manages collection development, including the library's artists' books collection. Senior often lectures on the history of artists' publications and contemporary art and design publishing. He also curates exhibitions of MoMA Library materials including: *Ray Johnson Designs, Please Come to the Show, Millennium Magazines, Access to Tools: Publications from the Whole Earth Catalog, 1968–74. Please Come to the Show*, a book documenting his exhibition of artists' invitations and show flyers from the MoMA Library, was published by Occasional Papers in 2014. His writing has appeared in *Frieze, Dot Dot Dot, Bulletins of the Serving Library, ART PAPERS*, and *C Magazine*. He organizes a regular program of events for the New York Art Book Fair and the L.A. Art Book Fair called the Classroom. Senior edited an artist's book series through *Printed Matter* and the NYABF from 2008-2014, which included publications with Dexter Sinister, David Horvitz, Emily Roysdon, Aaron Flint Jamison, James Hoff, and Eve Fowler. He serves on the board of directors of Primary Information and Yale Union.



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*Conceptual art*

MoMA Library  
Franklin Furnace

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Artist File

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*Technology - part*

# Please Come to the Show

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The Museum of Modern Art Library

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Edited by  
David Senior

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