

San Francisco Public Library

In the process of making a public art work for the new San Francisco Main Library, we returned to our early memories of browsing the library: to the ritual search and surprise attendant to opening any single drawer within the corridor of wooden cases that held the library card catalog. Each paper card within that system of stored information was marked, smudged and yellowed with the accumulated evidence of its use over time. With the move to the new main library building, those paper cards and wooden drawers that had served the San Francisco Public Library system since its inception over a hundred years ago, have been supplanted by computer screens and keyboards.

The nearly 50,000 paper cards we collected from the old library catalogues were used to surface three levels of the principal diagonal wall within the San Francisco Main Library building. Each card is annotated with a quote from the book described on the card, or from another book associated with that title by subject matter. Representing the diverse community that is served by the San Francisco Public Library system, nearly two hundred scribes annotated their selected cards in more than a dozen languages. This solitary process of researching, retrieving, reading, selecting, and then copying the contents of the books onto the cards was unique to each person. It represents the distinct way that each individual seeks and finds meaning in what she or he reads.

The arrangement of the cards on the library walls reflects our associational and subjective process. The overlay of hand written citations onto the printed catalogue card manifests the interface of the San Francisco community with their public library collection. For us, it also distinguishes the individualized activity of selecting to develop understanding and knowledge, from a merely arbitrary accumulation of collected information.

Most significantly, however, these annotated paper cards embody the heart of the public library art collection – the text that is folded between the covers of the books and buried within the library stacks. When we visit the public library, whether it is for our individual edification, inspiration, or distraction, we embark upon a journey into a world that we can only find within the covers of a book. The reverie of reading and researching has been our primary motivation through the course of the five years working together on this public art project. What we have created attempts to share that experience and leave behind a visual residue for those who will continue to enter and enjoy the library and its collection.