Upon initial observation, the Martha Rosler Library (2005-2008) looks like any other library. Thousands of books and assorted other materials are placed, not always tidily, on shelves. Signs on walls inform the visitors that they are welcome to look through everything that is there and, although items are not to be removed from the library, tables and chairs are available so that people can consult them at leisure. A photocopier has also been provided, thereby allowing portions of the materials to be reproduced and read elsewhere. And, giving the library a homely touch, pot plants are dotted around and upon shelves. However, for all the familiar trappings of a library environment, our first impressions our belied by the fact that what we are standing in a gallery space meant for the exhibitions of artworks.

Collected over a lifetime by the prominent North American artist Martha Rosler, the library contains “works of art history, poetry, travel, science fiction, mysteries, children's books, political and social theory, photograph albums, posters, postcards, magazines, dictionaries, maps, and newspaper clippings.” Her library, consisting of over 7600 items, was first displayed in e-flux’s exhibition space in New York in 2005 partly as a response to a personal quandary: in essence, Rosler’s library was overcrowding both her home and her studio. A conversation with artist and e-flux co-founder Anton Vidokle resulted in Rosler resituating a substantial portion of her library to e-flux’s exhibition space. Subsequently, the library travelled between 2005 and 2008 to several galleries and art institutions in Europe—including another project spearheaded by Vidokle in Berlin titled *unitednationsplaza*, which was an alternative temporary art school established—before returning to for a concluding display in Amherst, Massachusetts. Because of its exhibition history, we are dealing with an “art library,” then, but evidently not in the ordinary sense that this is a library *of* art books; rather, it’s an art library to the degree that this collection and its display is intended as an artwork.

The Martha Rosler Library, in that regard, exists in relation to numerous other examples of artworks that take form as libraries. Some instances of this overarching tendency can be interpreted as continuing pictorial and sculptural traditions within art practice—albeit adapting and altering those practices by incorporating manifestly discursive and archival elements; in mind here, I have instances such as Anselm Kiefer’s monumentalizing *The High Priestess/Zweistromland* (1985-89), Kader Attia’s *The Light of Jacob’s Ladder* (2013), and Yinka Shonibare’s colourful *The British Library* (2014), which all provide the beholder with a configuration to look at and, ultimately, observe from a distance. The Martha Rosler Library operates according to a different strand within this tendency. Her assorted books are not meant to be viewed in a strictly visual and corporeally detached mode common to many displays of artworks; instead, we are invited to peruse the shelves, pick up and read through the books, learn from their contents and/or take interest in Rosler’s underlined passages and scribbled annotations. In other words, we are permitted, and indeed encouraged, to behave with this artwork in very much the way we might behave in any library: hands-on and directly involved. As such, it parallels a diverse oeuvre of participatory and communal artworks promoting engaged types of spectatorship that became increasingly central to late twentieth century art practice. Examples in addition to The Martha Rosler Library proliferate, and, amongst their number, we could mention artworks like Thomas Hirschhorn’s *The Bataille Monument* and Meshac Gaba’s *Museum of Contemporary African Art: Library*, both of which were significantly included in Documenta 11 in 2002. These art libraries not only elicit physical engagement from the spectator and entwine with the intersubjective or community structures that became crucial to the artworld for a number of reasons such in the late 1990s and the 2000s, they also reflect the widespread expansion of research forms in or as art practice during that same approximate period.

As such, these practices necessarily impel us to muse upon a number of questions: perhaps firstly, given the context of this conference, why we ought to construe the Martha Rosler Library and similar strategies *as* artworks; secondly, how we measure the communal participation they intend and/or garner; and finally, thirdly, their relationship to debates concerning research in art and wider worries about their conjunction with the issue of knowledge production within what economists and philosophers have designated as post-Fordism. What responses I proffer won’t follow the order of the questions nor would they really constitute answers as such, but my hope, in any case, is to give them some preliminary accounting.

Let us return to the Martha Rosler Library and begin looking in a more active and tactile manner. The volumes on the shelves are evidently not distributed according to any long-established system of ordering, but instead are situated in a manner akin to what the influential art historian and librarian Aby Warburg characterized as “the law of the good neighbour.” Thus, for those invested in particular intellectual frameworks and histories as Rosler is, substantial portions of the collection are readily navigable, a case study of how personal library management can betoken plausible narratives as opposed to strict classification and still make objective sense. The stacks are divided into fifteen sections given an alphabetical designation running from A to O. Each item belongs to a particular numbered shelf, and each item is likewise assigned a number so that it is known where it belongs on a particular shelf. For example, the first item present and catalogued is Jeremy Lane science fiction novel *Yellow Men Sleep*, which occupies the first shelf and stack, and is therefore given the classmark A1-1. Straight afterwards A. Merritt’s *The Face in the Abyss*, is classmarked A1-2, whilst a second copy of that same novel is A1-3. The stacks vary greatly in number: A is by far the largest, with 4412 items, while L is the smallest, incorporating merely late twentieth-century four novels. The division of stacks likewise are prone to variation, with A1 amounting to thirty-six books, A2 to nineteen, while N1 mentions 231 items in total. Finally, themes shift wildly within each section. For all that idiosyncrasy, though, one never feels entirely lost in a library of babel. Books by a single author are, largely, grouped together. What strikes as fragmentation at one level can, nonetheless, coalesce into sense at another.

Leaving aside fragmentation for a moment, it’s worth stating that the crossover from private bibliophile idiosyncrasy to public display and utility is rather unusual. Libraries amassed by artists typically receive little recognition and art historians seldom make much use of them. Robert Smithson, a North American artist who had a short but meteoric and highly influential career, constitutes a rare example of an artist whose book—and vinyl—collection has been fully catalogued and publicized subsequent to his death in a plane crash on 20 July 1973. As with Rosler, it demonstrates an artist that is extremely well-read within a diverse range of interests. And, to that degree, casting one’s eye over the lists of books does proffer insights to his ways of thinking about the world and how that fed into his art practice and writings. It’s worth adding that Rosler’s or Smithson’s bookish tendencies hardly are out-of-step with their generation of artists. Although exceptionally well-read, both artists emerged within a context defined by massive transformations within North American art education.

Smithson’s categories perhaps obey categorical logic because they were imposed after his death; they certainly reflect established modes of library organization, even if privately determined or arrived at post-mortem. The Martha Rosler Library, however, evinces its processes of categorization being disrupted. For instance, within A1, the first five books are early twentieth century weird fiction, followed by one on the history of written script, and then three books related to Bolivia, a volume on Canadian mountain police, and, immediately after, four books on speaking Spanish. If these categorical transitions seem mostly rather abrupt, then the inclusion the book about the Canadian mountain police bracketed either side by approximately Spanish-themed texts is strikingly random. As well as “the law of the good neighbour,” also present is another system characterized by disjunction that is evident throughout the Martha Rosler Library. This second, disjunctive, system fundamentally depends upon the other system and its more conventional—albeit personal—logic. Indeed, disjunction receives its fullest impression precisely via its dialectical negation of a system typified by conjunction.

Rosler’s utilization of conjunction and disjunction suggests the Martha Rosler Library betokens montage strategies. Montage, as an art practice in which discrete elements are juxtaposed together in often jarring fashion, has been a recurring procedure in Rosler’s oeuvre for decades. Her early works *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972) and *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972) were photomontages which combined images taken from a variety of magazines. The former appropriated images from interior design alongside photojournalism from Vietnam, while the latter intermixed its visuals from domestic appliance and beauty advertising with pictures from pornography. Perhaps Rosler’s most celebrated artwork, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75), extended this strategy of disjunction by juxtaposing nondescript photographs of the impoverished Bowery area of New York with words metaphorically referring to drunkenness. Moreover, the Bowery piece evinces how the logic underpinning montage can be readily applied outside of traditional montage forms. In that respect, then, it becomes plausible to apprehend the Martha Rosler Library as a continuation of Rosler’s longstanding engagement with montage.

For a number of European avant-garde artists and writers in the 1920s and 1930s, montage staked its claim towards significance as a new art medium on several fronts. Its overall deployment of photographic and cinema technologies reflected how these had become vital to our sense of visual culture in modernity while also refusing to naturalize these representations. Montage’s usage of jarring juxtaposition rather than harmonious composition, moreover, had the virtue of signalling the accelerating hustle-and-bustle and manifold distractions competing for our attention within our increasingly urban existence. Refusing to merely resemble conditions of experience and emergent technologies under modernity, those experimenting with montage sought to make beholders and lookers become more reflexive and into participants in the elaboration of meaning. For the critic Walter Benjamin, montage induces heightened attention and transforms the viewer/reader into producers rather than disinterested or passive receivers of art and culture.

The Martha Rosler Library likewise serves to produce heightened forms of engaged spectatorship. Although this rather late in my paper, the name or title is certainly worth remarking upon: it is not “Martha Rosler’s Library” but the “Martha Rosler Library.” In titling the work, Rosler eschews the possessive apostrophe and instead opts for a wording that allows for a modicum of institutional impersonality as well as subtly creating space for the public. If the possessive were there, we might imagine that stepping into the library would become a socially awkward encounter, even though we have been invited. The absence of that possessive apostrophe, however, depersonalizes that collection enough to remove any lingering concerns. However, while that welcomes a visitor into the library, inviting them to make the space their own in some measure, the montage structure underpinning the arrangement of materials entails the visitor to become proactive and even willing to submit themselves to intellectual labour. The absence during its display of a catalogue meant that the visitor had to peruse the shelves, divine the organization of materials, and ultimately accept that it was less a case of *searching* than of *discovering* particular items. Indeed, the emphasis upon discovery results in the visitor’s attention potentially being caught by books and other printed matter that they hitherto didn’t know existed, or perhaps didn’t know they were looking for until they found it.

That discovery, as well as the admixture of logical order and disjunction, also enjoins the visitor to reflect upon how systems of categorization, such as we find in libraries generally, evince specific cultural and intellectual horizons. As useful any library system may be, it needs to be remembered that it is contingent, decidedly *man*made, and mirrors and thereby produces certain ideological biases. Just as photomontage demonstrated that photography’s claims to documentary realism are questionable, Rosler’s bibliomontage counters any assumption of the library’s organizational naturalism. Moreover, through such actions, Rosler bids us to consider how knowledge is produced rather than exists as a reflection of the world or given state of affairs. Libraries are, after all, in their own way, forms of representation. For Rosler, it’s through awareness of *how* representations are constructed and exploration of what kind of representations best serve us, that we can begin to understand and assert our own agency; we become engaged citizens.

This, then, is the community Rosler seeks to generate a space for via the library. Such a community possibly doesn’t preexist the space created for it, but it’s certainly possible that it comes into being through it. Throughout her career, Rosler has been concerned to reach a diverse audience for not just her own practice, but also to contest artworld elitism and fulfil at last the democratic potential for art first ascribed in the late eighteenth century. She has attempted this, in the past, by holding garage sales within galleries, combining performance art with quotidian activities, thereby bringing both artworld and non-artworld audiences together in such a way that they can construe themselves as instituting a single, but variegated audience. In the act of sharing and making common, the Martha Rosler Library continues that endeavour by acknowledging not only the library’s communal function but also its radical potential. Indeed, libraries give us power.