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A Short Account of the Library

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On July 1, 1731, Benjamin Franklin and the Leather Apron Club of Philadelphia established the first public Circulating Library. Books were quite expensive for Franklin and friends (mostly printers, shopkeepers and mechanics of modest means) -- by pooling resources, many volumes could be shared among contributing members. One was free to borrow any book from the library for a length of time, return it and borrow another. Library subscriptions were available to all and fees (forty shillings to join, ten shillings per year) were used to purchase new books and maintain the collection. The Library Company of Philadelphia comprised fifty original members and continues today. (Tellingly, it also gave birth to an altruistic cousin: The Free Library of Philadelphia.)

The Circulating Library was a radical departure from existing libraries which operated on an Archive model -- a safe place for important records. The earliest libraries consisted primarily of commercial transactions and inventories on clay tablets. As the library developed, it retained this archival model -- information and artefacts were collected, concentrated, protected and institutionalized. Instead, the freshly conceived Circulating Library proposed in Philadelphia treated its books and its members as a process. Books were meant to be used, borrowed and shared. The Library was built to expand and evolve, a shifting arrangement of ideas and objects constantly circulating around a community of committed readers.

And, the books themselves began to mark this change. Call slips in the inside back cover trace a sequence of readers; the pages are dog-eared; careful notes have been made in the margin; the final two pages have fallen out -- each book becoming an index of its own shifting patterns of circulation.

We may now require neither a building nor books for the Manifesta 6 School library. With relaxed storage requirements, an electronic library can produce copies for distribution on-demand and Just-In-Time. And still, being a library, meticulous records will be kept, not by a bespectacled librarian, but rather by a software program (Webalizer v2.3 if you must know.). This website statistics program creates logs of activities -- who looked at what, when and for how long. Where did they come from and where did they go? In the case of a PDF, how many times has it been downloaded, when and by whom? (1132 people have downloaded the Application.pdf so far.) This information is available and slightly smart software can be programmed to recover and represent it in a coherent format.

We then propose an alternate model for the Library. In place of the Archive or Circulating Library, we offer the Distributing Library. A collection of PDFs are freely downloadable from this website, in unlimited quantities, no library card required. Instead of 50,000 books, 1 copy each, sealed in an archive, or 15,000

books, a few copies each, constantly circulating, the Distributing Library offers 150 books (+/-), unlimited copies, all available free to be downloaded, digested, dispersed.

Each PDF downloaded from the Library then creates a unique record and can be added to a database. As the Library distributes materials, it stores detailed records of each transaction. (Looping back to the library's initial charge of storing commercial transactions and inventories (only this time they are records of distribution) to become something of a hybrid/bastard: the Circulating-Archive.) From this meta-information (who, where, when, which), it would be possible to draw a network, create a careful accounting or to construct a meaningful organization-diagram-map-composite portrait of the Library's materials and their distributed readers.

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23 June 2006

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