Artists’ Books in Libraries: A Review of the Literature

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Artists’ books are at once a highly specialized genre within the realm of library and information science and a classification of information broad enough to embrace the same fundamental considerations associated with all library materials. These include selection, acquisition, processing, cataloging, storage, conservation, and exploitation.

Do artists’ books belong in libraries? In an installment of his series “On Track of the Marvelous” in Public Library Quarterly, Jonathan Held emphatically answers yes: “The art librarian in a public, academic or special library is in a unique position to investigate the new developments ... in the art world.” He adds, “Artists’ books ... are naturals for libraries, because they stress the creative potential of the book medium.” Writing in Art Libraries Journal, Simon Ford strengthens this assertion with another perspective: “Artists’ books can restate the long-standing relationship between the book and the library.” His words from 1993 mean even more today, when virtual information often eclipses paper formats.

Research Strategy

Research for published sources for this article began with a search in the Library Literature database for the LC subject heading Artists’ Books. After the author vetted the resulting list of thirty-six articles to determine relevancy to the study at hand, twenty-one records remained. The publication dates of most of the selected articles cluster around the years 1989-1993 and 2000-2002. Articles, monographs, conference proceedings, and documents culled from the bibliographies of this initial set of articles provided additional reference material.

Two searches of the ARLIS-L (Art Libraries Society of North America Discussion List) archives for subject words artists’ books and artist books produced material that complements the Library Literature resources. Most of the relevant ARLIS-L threaded discussions have taken place since 2000 although the ARLIS-L archives go back to 1996.

As research progressed, the author identified the primary collections of artists’ books in American libraries, including academic, museum, art school, and public libraries. Associated with many of these collections are Web-based resources which add yet another layer of valuable research material. These include the libraries’ OPACs, collection development policies, pathfinders, image databases, and studio art curricula, and collectively provide a snapshot of the state of the art of artists’ book collections in libraries today. (Please see the appendix for a list of notable collections.)

Site visits were made to the artists’ book collections in the Hunt Library at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and Printed Matter in New York City. Finally, the author’s hands-on experience working with the artists’ book collection at the New York Public Library during a recent month-long internship provided valuable information for this study.

The topic “artists’ books in libraries” is broad enough in scope to make research limitations prudent. The author chose to limit this study to collections in the United States and to exclude virtual artists’ books from consideration. In addition, special attention is paid to teaching and research collections.

Defining Artists’ Books

Definitions of artists’ books are as varied as the books themselves. They range from Clive Phillpot’s straightforward “books made or conceived by artists” to the convoluted attempt Philip Smith makes in his article, “The Whatness of Bookness, or What is a Book?” to Maggie Yax’s simple resigned statement, “artists’ books...stubbornly remain undefinable [sic].” Ford added an appendix titled “Towards a Definitive Definition of an Artist’s Book” to his 1993 article that offers twenty-five different definitions. Needless to say, a universal definition remains elusive, and attempts to find one are still contentious.

In Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature, librarian Stefan Klima characterizes the definition debate as representing “all areas of the art and book world: critic, librarian, bookmaker, historian, and artist.” Furthermore, he firmly establishes libraries’ place in the long-standing debate by stating, “The one corner which had little trouble with artists’ books was the art library. As early as 1980, the Library of Congress accepted the term in its list of established subjects.”

This author favors the definition found in Descriptive Cataloging of Artists’ Books published by ARLIS/UK & Ireland and will use it throughout her research. It defines an artist’s book as “A book or book-like object in which an artist has had a major input beyond illustration or authorship: where the final appearance of the book owes much to an artist’s interference/participation: where the book is the manifestation of the artist’s creativity: where the book is a work of art in itself.”

It is helpful to understand that most “art of the book” can be assigned to one of two categories. The first, production pieces, are akin to common paperback books—inexpensively produced, widely distributed, accessible and disposable. This is the class of work on which the modern artists’ book movement was founded in the 1960s. These early books were artists’ attempts to
“democratize the art world” by circumventing established galleries and museums and exhibiting their work in an alternative space. That “space” was the book form.12 The second category, very limited editions or one-of-a-kind objects, are sometimes called “book art.” Often characterized by unusual materials (latex, metal, Plexiglas, fabric, etc.) and sculptural structures, these unconventional books may be housed in exquisitely crafted boxes or other shaped containers. Artists’ books are not livres d’artistes—expensive volumes “in which the illustrations are original works of art … individually bound for each library or collector.”13

Research Intentions

This review of the literature and supplementary materials is intended to be a survey of selected considerations for artists’ book collections in libraries and not a comprehensive study. It is anticipated that the review will reveal areas in which the literature is scarce and/or outdated, and thus suggest special topics that warrant further investigation or in-depth examination. It may also suggest special projects that will add to existing resources for librarians.

Aside from articles that approach the topic “artists’ books in libraries” in very general terms, the existing literature roughly falls into three basic categories:

• Collection development
• Cataloging
• Collection use (its purpose and its physical handling)

These three areas are, of course, interdependent. As Anne Britton says, “Now that you have it, what are you going to do with it and how?”14 However, the distinctions are significant enough to justify reviewing each of these areas separately.

Literature of Collection Development

“[Artists’ books] can refer to and illuminate a number of disciplines.”15 This statement should be at the philosophical heart of collection development policies for artists’ books. Its relevance to academic libraries is obvious (curricular support), but in public libraries, artists’ book collections can support programming of many kinds: workshops, lectures, exhibits, etc.

Knowing what to buy and how to acquire it are basic considerations for individuals charged with collecting the genre. What to buy obviously depends upon the purpose of the collection and, once articulated, can be framed in a collection development policy. This section will provide examples of selection criteria from the literature.

Many academic collections evolve along with the curricula of their parent institutions. An ARLIS/NA conference abstract published in Art Documentation summarizes artists’ book collections in instructional settings. In it the curator of the Joan Flasch Collection at the Flaxman Library of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) explains, “The selection philosophy and development of the collection are dictated by the needs of the artists, faculty, and researchers who use it.”16 At AIC, this means curricular support primarily for printmaking, photography, book making and book arts, and art history and theory. Similarly, a Cleveland Institute of Art librarian describes her collection as having developed in response to the Freshman Foundation Design Program curriculum. At Carnegie Mellon University, art librarian Maureen Dawley collects to support the School of Art’s core curriculum, Concept Studio. In fact, the artists’ book classes she teaches are integrated into the curriculum.18 Artists’ books may also be collected as examples of contemporary art in support of courses in the history of contemporary art.

In 1999 a general artists’ books questionnaire was posted to ARLIS-L, whose results were published in Art Documentation. The answers led its authors to conclude that “faculty presumably recommend for purchase the artists’ books that would be valuable teaching tools.”19 It is not a giant leap, then, to see that librarians who understand artists’ books can assume a more prominent role in development activities by partnering with faculty. In other cases, variety is a guiding principle. As one university art librarian says, “Students should have the opportunity to see a variety of artists’ book formats (codex, accordion fold, scroll).”20

Other criteria mentioned in the literature include cost, the artist (reputation/location/affiliation/gender/ethnicity), aesthetic value, craftsmanship, other libraries’ holdings, etc. Occasionally policies allow for the deliberate inclusion or exclusion of certain sub-specialty formats such as one-of-a-kind pieces or virtual works.

Betsy Pittman (Virginia Commonwealth University) and Janis Ekdahl (formerly of The Museum of Modern Art Library) address collecting based on the principles of the original artists’ book movement. In College & Research Libraries News Pittman writes that these principles result in the “acquisition of pieces of moderate cost, issued in editions of at least one hundred.”21 In INSPERL, Ekdahl similarly describes the books in the MoMA collection as “inexpensive publications that came to prominence since 1960 … issued in open or large editions (for example, 100- or-more copies). Many are neither signed nor numbered. In principle, these artists’ books have closer affinities to mass-market paperbacks.”22

Once a library knows what to collect, the question of acquisition arises. Printed Matter figures so prominently in the collection development activities of some of the best artists’ book collections in the country that it can be considered a development partner. A case in point is The New York Public Library Print Collection, whose collection development policy states, “acquisitions are often made with guidance from Printed Matter, the major distributor of artist books.”23 Printed Matter is the MoMA library’s principal supplier and works with Carnegie Mellon University as well.

Pittman’s article is the only one that includes detailed information about acquiring materials in this specialized field. Her special collections and archives department at Virginia Commonwealth University “maintains several standing orders with established publishers of book art and reviews the catalogs of newer publishers, individual artists, and galleries in an effort to maintain the stature of the collection.”24 VCU, with a collection of about 2,000 items, also encourages artists to submit work for review by a three-person committee—the curator, an outside consultant, and a local artist.

Literature about Cataloging

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present thorough theoretical and technical analyses of the practice of cataloging artists’ books. This section of the review, therefore, considers some of the challenges, creative solutions, and best practices common
to the artists’ book cataloging community that are discussed in the literature.

In 1991 Timothy Shipe (University of Iowa) published an often-cited article in *Art Documentation* titled “The Monographic Cataloger and the Artist’s Book: The Ideal Reader.” By itself it presents a thought-provoking and creative examination of the challenges catalogers face when dealing with library materials of this specialized genre. Although more than twelve years old, the article has not been surpassed in its treatment of the subject. It can be complemented, however, by Fred Hillbruner’s 1992 IFLA conference paper and Simon Ford’s 1993 *Art Libraries Journal* article to give information scientists, curators, instructors, and artists a more complete picture of both the philosophical and technical issues related to cataloging artists’ books.

The how-to-catalog-artists’-books dilemma is still very much alive, but literature is scarce. After a special program about artists’ book collections, participants at a meeting of the Midwestern Art Cataloging Discussion Group concluded, “there is no published guide dealing with the cataloging of artists’ books, nor is there any sort of workshop or class on the same topic of which anyone present is aware.” There is, in fact, the previously mentioned ARLIS/UK & Ireland guide, but it is dated, and according to administrator Sonia French, “Eventually we would like to revise these guidelines, but there are no immediate plans.”

Janis Ekdahl articulates the relationship of vigilant cataloging to access at the MoMA library, a non-circulating research facility that serves scholars and students interested in the art of the modern period: “The Library pursues several strategies to make the Artist Book Collection accessible to as wide a public as possible. Foremost among those strategies is thorough cataloging.” Ekdahl elaborates, “Each artist book has something to reveal to the right reader. It is our challenge and mission to facilitate those connections so that these treasures are revealed.”

Timothy Shipe expresses a virtually identical sentiment, saying, “The aim of the cataloger is to match the right book to the right reader,” recalling S.R. Ranganathan’s “Every book its reader,” one of his *Five Laws of Library Science*. “Obeying the law” poses additional challenges to artists’ book catalogers who face the task of using deeply established, standardized information science tools—namely AACR2, LCSH, and MARC—to catalog items that have more in common with art objects than they do with books. In the interest of shared cataloging (that is, contributing records to OCLC or RILIN) most authors recommend using these standards, along with extensive prose notes, to strike a balance between the science and the art of cataloging.

Shipe is realistic about this compromise, explaining, “I frankly do not see a possibility that academic libraries collecting artists’ books will be able to accept different cataloging standards defined by a group of subject specialists for a relatively narrow range of materials.”

If Shipe is realistic, then Stanford cataloger Kay Teel is downright enthusiastic. Her 2002 ARLIS/NA conference abstract, “Challenges to Cataloging Artists’ Books,” is a refreshing antidote to the anxious, technical, and procedurally heavy approach that many authors take to the topic. While she agrees that “description of the item must … occur primarily through the use of field notes,” she says that “even in the absence of a perfect solution, it is nevertheless possible to draw a great deal of pleasure from dealing with such items. … Use the cataloging tools you have and use them freely, exploiting the fullest flexibility of the MARC record. … In short, ‘stop agonizing!’”

Most of the literature refers to academic libraries, which is significant because it is essential that artists’ book descriptions in those collections be recorded as knowledgeably and completely as possible. Academic library collections presumably are teaching collections, and students search for artists’ books according to physical description. In Hillbruner’s experience at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, “students asked for books not by author or title, but by such characteristics as the type of binding used, the press, or the method of printing.” Maureen Dawley, as custodian of an exceptional and actively used teaching collection at Carnegie Mellon, confirmed this phenomenon. She cites “binding” (e.g., codex, concertina, spiral, stab, etc.) as the most searched-for artists’ book descriptor. Thus, the factor that poses the biggest challenge to catalogers, description, is also the most crucial for access. Hillbruner calls this “the student’s perspective on access,” and says it must be addressed.

The literature offers some recommendations. ARLIS/UK & Ireland suggests using AACR2 “as creatively and exhaustively as possible to adequately describe an item.” Both Teel and Ekdahl make use of MARC subject-access field 655, an index term for genre/form and/or physical characteristics. MARC field tag 655 can accommodate terms from the Getty Research Institute’s *Art & Architecture Thesaurus* (AAT), a controlled vocabulary to which the Franklin Furnace organization was a significant contributor. A search of the MoMA Library’s online catalog DADABASE for *artists’ books* in the field “form/genre” produced 9,475 records in November 2003.

Contributing a dissenting voice to the literature advocating established cataloging standards for artists’ books is Maggie Yax in *The New Library Scene*. She states, “Some artists’ books are cataloged within the parameters of standard cataloging … under the general subject heading “artists books,” with descriptive cataloging providing extensive information. However, it’s rarely that simple. … It would make no sense to follow AACR2’s instruction to disregard blank pages if the entire book consists of blank pages. Or, how can you count the pages of a book which is permanently screwed shut?”

Even a cursory treatment of artists’ book cataloging such as this one would not be complete without again mentioning Printed Matter in New York City. Anne Britton, the MoMA Library’s cataloger, worked with Printed Matter for nearly two years to develop its online catalog, and in the process wrote and implemented guidelines which transformed Printed Matter’s catalog into a reliable, searchable OPAC of artists’ books. Britton’s nineteen-page, unpublished *Cataloging Manual* describes the resulting catalog as a “multifunctional, authoritative document of the genre of contemporary artists’ books and publications” and emphasizes that “careful entering of information into each record in Printed Matter’s catalog ensures both the … quality and the functionality of the database for present and future … scholars, artists and others.”

**Literature of Collection Use**

The third and final consideration discussed in this paper is how librarians and patrons use and handle artists’ books once they are physically placed in a collection and accessible because of a good cataloging record.
Artists’ book collections are anomalies in the library world. In spite of their nearly across-the-board classification as special collections, they need to be read, handled, and scrutinized for the construction techniques and materials used in their creation. As art objects they are natural candidates for exhibit and public display as ways to promote and publicize the library. Of course there is healthy disagreement in the profession about how to address the paradox of keeping collections simultaneously accessible and protected. The disagreement is not so much about how and where the books are held as it is about how they are used. A review of the literature reveals two primary schools of thought. One remains truer to the founding democratic tenor of the artists’ book genre: keep the collection accessible (albeit shelved in restricted stacks and housed in protective enclosures) and use it. The other is closer to traditional special collections treatment where keeping the materials hidden protects them and only rarely do they see the light of display.

Andrea Chemero’s 1999 ARLIS-L survey reflects primarily the latter philosophy. While acknowledging that “limiting access to these books through exhibitions or in-house circulation is quite often contrary to the artists’ intentions,” librarians frequently choose to err on the side of restricted access to patrons and conservative exhibition practices. The survey authors even recommend that patrons be prohibited from using the original object and suggest instead that a “virtual catalog could take the place of the original.” They also argue that “exhibitions give rise to frequent opportunities for damage to materials to occur,” opting instead for “other alternatives for promotion.”

MoMA Library policy, on the other hand, is a good example of the school of thought that advocates easier access to artists’ book collections. Students, critics, curators, auction house employees, artists, and members of the general public use MoMA’s collection. During class visits, students are encouraged to handle and discuss the artists’ books with instructors. Former director Janis Ekdahl approached exhibitions with equal openness: “Awareness of the collection is enhanced through exhibitions. The Library routinely lends artists’ books to exhibitions in the Museum and elsewhere...The Library also has a small display area where artists’ books are regularly featured.”

It is important to understand that institutions which choose to offer access to their artists’ book collections by encouraging patron use and display are not forsaking the preservation of these very special collections. Active use of an artists’ book collection easily can be balanced with conscientious conservation measures such as staff training, careful exhibition practices, a written conservation policy, and routine checks for damage. “Special collections” still implies enhanced security and ease of retrieval by keeping like materials together.

A number of strategies are discussed in the literature, both intentional and unintentional (i.e., the lucky byproduct of another policy or procedure), which caretakers of artists’ book collections employ to balance access and preservation. Thorough and creative cataloging enables patrons to narrow down their selections before requesting actual materials. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, “patrons interested in offset materials, items using handmade papers, or items narrative in nature may search [the catalog] ... to find relevant items in the collection. This system has proven to be most effective for patron access to the collection with a minimal handling of the books.”

There are several other methods libraries can employ to provide the sort of “contextualizing” material that helps patrons analyze the relevance of books to their particular interests prior to making retrieval requests. For example, the New York Public Library and the libraries of MoMA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Yale University have ephemera files, also called artists’ or vertical files. These files contain reviews, press clippings, exhibition announcements, book dealer catalogs, correspondence, etc., by and about the artist-authors in their collections, all valuable primary source research materials difficult, if not impossible, to find elsewhere. The Arts of the Book Collection at Yale University Library recently launched the Book Arts Ephemera Database, a pilot project designed “to make information about contemporary book artists and small presses easier to access ... through remote viewing of the actual ephemeral items.” Libraries may also choose to develop collateral collections of reference volumes about artists’ books so that patrons new to the genre can acquaint themselves with it before delving into the holdings.

Other libraries employ the creative use of in-house finding aids, both low tech and high tech. The Rhode Island School of Design library maintains “a set of notebooks kept at Reference with photocopied images from each book, a copy of the shelf-list card and a detailed checklist of physical characteristics for almost every book in the collection.” Each record in Printed Matter’s online catalog has a paragraph-long synopsis of the book along with a thumbnail-size image of the front cover. The Millard Sheets Library at Otis College of Art and Design is building an excellent Artists’ Book Image Database with assistance from the Getty Electronic Cataloging Initiative (http://artbook.library.otis.edu/). The database is browsable and searchable by artist, subject, press, and type (physical characteristics). Every book included is imaged page by page from front cover to back. Otis’s database is exceptional and can serve as a model for one way to further the mission of keeping artists’ book collections simultaneously accessible and protected.

Image databases such as the ones described in this section are not designed as substitutes for the real materials they represent. These digital projects are conceived, designed, and implemented with the purpose of improving access to artists’ books, not taking the place of it. They simply, but importantly, minimize unnecessary handling of a collection.

Conclusion

Each section of this paper reveals ways in which artists’ book collections provide, as Simon Ford states, “a unique opportunity for librarians to create a role for themselves beyond the mere provision of information.” For example, librarians can partner with faculty on collection development, collaborate with other information scientists to devise more effective cataloging standards, and work with curators and artists to promote artists’ books both within the library and beyond. Alone, librarians can research the genre and contribute scholarship to the field. However, the role beyond traditional information provider may be at its richest and most rewarding when it engages students.

Teaching collections of artists’ books have tremendous potential to inspire creativity across a wide range of academic disciplines. They are also worth studying for their own sake. Because artists’ books can refer to subjects as diverse as
literature, philosophy, languages, politics, history, sociology, and the sciences, in addition to studio art and art history, collections are as much at home in university and even public (research) libraries as they are in art and design school libraries. In any case, librarians are perfectly placed both physically and intellectually to help students navigate a course from concept to creation of an artist’s book. This help can be as basic as getting a student started searching the OPAC for the LC subject heading Artists’ Books, or as advanced as showing a student the structural difference between a simple pamphlet binding and its more complex relative, a dos-à-dos binding.

Assuming that the basic information science structure of an artists’ book collection is in place—that is, thoughtful and collaborative collection development, meticulous cataloging and (ideally) in-house access resources, and sound housing and handling policies—librarians are free to exploit their artists’ books in support of their school’s curriculum. Hands-on methods may include hosting professors and their classes, teaching short introductory sessions, workshops, or courses for credit, and collecting and displaying student work. Materials methods may include visual databases, pathfinders, illustrated glossaries, and even physical teaching models. As this paper has already established, many of these information resources have the incidental benefit of contributing to a collection’s preservation by minimizing its handling.

Finally, it may be said that librarians are artists’ books’ “best-kept secret.” It is not unusual for a collection to exist solely because a librarian recognized the richness of the medium and the power it has to cross disciplines and patron populations. The collections that thrive do so because librarians have the expertise and interest to guide acquisitions, and because their advocacy on behalf of the genre is persuasive enough to earn support for collection development, use, and care.

APPENDIX: Artists’ Book Collections in American Libraries: A Selected List

Carnegie Mellon University, Fine Arts and Special Collections Department in Hunt Library http://www.library.cmu.edu/Research/Arts/Art/artistsbooks.html Web site includes a synopsis of the collection and an explanation of its scope, an online exhibit, an excellent pathfinder with instructions on how to find artists’ books in CMU’s collection, and annotated links to a diverse mix of external sources. A word or phrase search in the OPAC Cameo for call number 704.655 (CMU’s recommended method for searching artists’ books) returned 314 records.52

The Cleveland Institute of Art, Gund Library Artists’ Books Collection http://www.cia.edu/administrative/academicaffairs/library/artistsbooks.asp Gund Library’s Web site has a short introduction to its Artists’ Books Collection, but it links to a creative and very well done PDF-format pathfinder titled “Making a Book.” Gund Library’s holdings are in the Case Western Reserve University’s OPAC which, when searched for the LC subject heading Artists’ Books, returned 1,018 records.

The Museum of Modern Art/Franklin Furnace Artist Book Collection http://momaa.org/research/library/index.html MoMA Library’s Web site has an extensive FAQs document that answers the questions “What is the Franklin Furnace Artist Book Collection?” “How can I find Franklin Furnace Archive materials in DADABASE?” and “How can I find artists’ books in DADABASE?” An advanced search in the OPAC for the phrase artists’ books in the field form/genre (the recommended method) returned 9,474 records.

The New York Public Library, Print Collection http://nypl.org/research/chsw/spe/art/print/print.html Although sizeable and very selectively collected, the initiative to thoroughly catalog the collection’s artists’ books is in its infancy. Approximately 350 books have a brief-record presence in CATNYP, the library’s OPAC, at this time.

Otis College of Art and Design, Millard Sheets Library, Artists’ Book Image Database http://artbooklibrary.otis.edu Resources include a short history of the artists’ book collection plus an exceptional Getty-grant-initiated, stand-alone online database that includes images of every page of the forty-five books in it. A subject search in Otis library’s OPAC returned 1,545 records.

Rhode Island School of Design http://www.risd.edu/libraryguide.cfml1,182 records resulted from an OPAC subject search.

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, John M. Flaxman Library, Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection http://www.artic.edu/saic/art/flash/SAIC’s excellent, image-heavy artists’-book-dedicated Web site includes a pictorial “sampling” of the collection, an online exhibition and accompanying exhibition catalog, and a clear description of the collection. An OPAC search returned 1,019 artists’ book records.

Virginia Commonwealth University, James Branch Cabell Library, Special Collections and Archives, Book Art Collection http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/artistsbooks.html Resources include a good explanation of book art and a comprehensive Web page of links. 1,351 records for artists’ books resulted from an OPAC search.

Yale University, Yale University Library Arts of the Book Collection http://www.library.yale.edu/aob/Yale’s “arts of the book” information includes a discussion of the term “artists’ books,” a brief history, and a basic list of relevant links. A major new resource is an image database of the collection’s ephemera files.

Notes

4. Printed Matter is a “non-profit organization founded in 1976 by artists and artworkers with the mission to foster the appreciation, dissemination, and understanding of artists’ books and other artists’ publications.” (http://www.printedmatter.org).
17. Ibid.
18. Maureen Dawley, interview by the author, October 18, 2003, Fine Arts and Special Collections Department, Hunt Library, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.
31. Ibid., 248.
37. Dawley, interview.
40. The Franklin Furnace Archive of Artists’ Books “was established in 1976 as an alternative space that collected and exhibited artists’ books.” In 1993 the MoMA Library acquired this archive of more than 3,500 titles.
52. The “records returned” numbers in this appendix are the result of quick searches for the LC subject heading Artists’ Books unless noted otherwise. Such a search will not discriminate between actual artists’ books and books about artists’ books, or about making them. The information, therefore, is intended to give a very general idea of these libraries’ holdings. The numbers were retrieved on November 30, 2003.

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