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A Tapestry of Call Numbers

Megan R. Luke



Study carrel, Fine Arts Library, 1980s. Reproduction. FAL Administrative Files.

I N 2002 (MY FIRST YEAR IN GRADUATE SCHOOL), MY STUDY CARREL WAS one of many that, together with banks of microfilm, filled a room in the basement of the Fogg Museum, a space wedged between the stacks of the Fine Arts Library and a photocopier. Since much of graduate school is devoted to photocopying, reading, and moving heavy books from one shelf (or city) to another, I now look back on this room and think it was a pretty perfect place to start. It was where many of my most enduring friendships were cemented as we gossiped, joked, and griped relentlessly. At least, in retrospect, that's what I remember doing for much of that year—a sense made more vivid by the memory of a student two years ahead of us rightly reminding us one

afternoon that we were, after all, in a *library*, and that she was trying to take her general exams and could we *please*, for the love of all that was holy, just take it outside? All the signs that had alerted us that an exam would be in progress notwithstanding, what could we have possibly known about this rite of initiation that seemed so colossal and far off? We were too giddy and stressed out about passing German.

I loved browsing the shelves of the other carrels, the desks of the “dissertaters” enviably more tightly curated than my ever-expanding, increasingly Dada assemblage, with books on Barnett Newman cheek by jowl with tomes on Fascist urbanism. The stacks, by contrast, were more serious, and it took me nearly four years to internalize their idiosyncratic geography. Here silence reigned and time stopped, giving the space a strange intimacy despite the vast extent of the volumes that populated it. A warren of few distinguishing landmarks, the stacks made me feel how solitary my study ultimately was and how vain any hope of securing a satisfied overview would be. Moving among the three completely different systems of call numbers was like weaving a path through the history of the library and of what it meant to study the history of art there. At the time, upstairs and surrounding the computer terminals, the old card catalog stood as a similar monument to institutional history, but a benign one because it did not get in the way and lent the place a hallowed air, whereas the tapestry of call numbers—Fogg, FA, and FAL-LC—disoriented and distracted me on a daily basis. When HOLLIS first told me I could find a book in something called the X-Cage, I very well might have let out a yelp of disbelief.

Little did I know during that first year that the Fine Arts Library was quietly priming me to master and enjoy the fascinations of the far more byzantine systems of German and Swiss libraries. When I returned after my dissertation research abroad, I had to move my carrel to one nestled in the stacks—a move that augured both the end of my time at Harvard and the library’s own farewell to this basement. I chose number 33, across from the FA shelves with all the books on Kurt Schwitters, leaving ample room on my desk for the books for the next project and the one after that and for “Oh, now *that* is cool!” and “Who knew that *this* was here?”

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