

Bibliomancy: Ambiguity and the Art Library in the Face of Algorithmic Certainty

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Abstract

As creative education onboards generative AI, and students contend with algorithmic certainty and optimised outputs, the art library provides an indispensable environment for embodied learning, fostering engagement with ambiguity through serendipitous discovery during the creative process. This essay demonstrates how creative educators can use the book spine poetry and art library to engage their students with ambiguity and embodied learning.

Introduction

Inspiration seeking is one of the primary reasons art students carry out research (Pacey, 1982; Mason and Robinson, 2011); they are compulsive browsers, so slower and more tactile forms of research – such as those found in libraries and archives – spark their imaginations. Yet *Technopoly* (Postman, 1992) has officially become the status quo, creating a marked shift in the way students interface their learning and find authority in technology.

At the turn of the century, Siemons (2005) Theory of Connectivism identified that learning would increasingly become a process of connecting specialised nodes of information sources from digital learning environments. Swipe ahead two decades and the digital age has transformed creative education: digital learning environments, search engines with optimised algorithms, and artificially intelligent technologies comprise key components of the educator's toolkit. The rapid acceleration and intensification of information transmission have led to an "information overload", creating fragmented and sometimes discontinuous learning experiences (O'Donnell, 2015; Floridi, 2016; Odell, 2021).

In a respite from the breakneck speed of technological interfacing, embodied learning activities – such as the book spine poetry workshop – offer a counterbalance to this "information overload" by engaging students with the ambiguity imperative to creative education (Hilles & Robbins, 2024; Thompson & Beene, 2024). As third-space professionals, art librarians are uniquely positioned to integrate this productive

ambiguity into the hybrid curriculum and the creative research process. Through pedagogically informed workshops that invite students to engage with uncertainty, librarians can foster exploratory- and discovery-driven approaches to learning. Activities such as zine-making, treasure hunting, and book spine poetry offer timely and innovative interventions that encourage students to browse the stacks and make meaning from print books.

The book spine poetry workshop demonstrates how the library as a physical space – with its stacks of books, magazines, and archival materials – provides a valuable embodied creative learning experience that is not easily replicated by digital learning environments. With reference to this workshop as an activity that engages creative arts students with ambiguity through embodied learning, this essay reaffirms Frankel and McLean's (2025:103) claim that "libraries are uniquely suited to supporting creative exploration" by exemplifying the art library as a trusted, generative, and creative tool.

Key Concepts: Ambiguity, Embodied Learning, and Serendipity

Ambiguity and uncertainty are "prerequisites for creativity" (Dineen and Collins, 2005 cited in Orr, 2018:46), therefore creative arts students must understand and engage with these concepts throughout the creative process. Orr and Shreeve (2018:57) say ambiguity "can refer to inexactness, but it can also refer to being open to more than one interpretation"; indeed, Small and Schmutte (2022) suggest it means understanding something in two or more possible ways. Ambiguity is present across creative education in numerous places, shifting subtly in the act of creative practice, research, assessment, and the embodied role of the student, teacher, and artist (Austerlitz, 2008; Blair and Fitch, 2015; Davey, 2016; Orr and Shreeve, 2018; Fitch, 2023; Smyth *et al.* 2026). For example, a student may encounter ambiguity when exploring the multiple meanings of a fashion designer's colour choices, or when addressing conflicting ideas about how to convey gender dynamics within their contextual studies assessment.

Such ambiguity can cause confusion or overwhelm, but it also carries opportunity – as exemplified by the art library. To adapt a well-known expression, libraries in education exist as both "bricks and clicks" (Roberts, 2019:3) by facilitating both physical and digital learning. Many students, particularly those in Generation Z who tend to be confident in their digital skills, may feel inclined to conduct research independently, neglecting in-person queries and more tactile research. However, libraries have evolved alongside the digital curriculum, enabling them to remain at the heart of the academic environment. By striking a balance between physicality of space, seamless digital access, and embedded research support, art libraries facilitate a productive form of ambiguity and serendipitous discovery that remains essential to creative practice.

This serendipitous discovery, a possible outcome of engaging with embodied library research, illustrates how creative arts students can find opportunity in ambiguity. Serendipity means "the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way" (Soanes and Stevenson, 2009:1313) or, more specifically, it is "what

happens when we, in unplanned ways, encounter resources (information, things, people, etc.) that we find interesting” (Bjorneborne, 2017:1071). The art library, in part owing to its design, fosters serendipitous discovery, which can both help creative arts students navigate ambiguity, and be an ambiguous process itself.

Serendipitous discovery in the art library therefore means the unplanned discovery of resources that provide useful information and/or inspiration in creative research. This could manifest as a fashion student browsing the stacks, rummaging through the journals collection, and opening an old copy of *Vogue* featuring a photograph that inspires them to include shoulder pads in their current project. It could also be a makeup student overhearing a conversation between a librarian and a tutor in which they reference a concept that the student realises connects with their own research for an assignment. The library user engages with ambiguity through this process of serendipitous discovery, as they encounter multiple new ideas and make various new connections with their existing ideas.

These instances of serendipitous discovery are unplanned, because library users cannot anticipate the specifics of their discoveries, but they are not unexpected: a creative arts student comes to the library seeking inspiration and information. Therefore, although serendipitous discovery may come in part from chance, it is not totally random. Art libraries facilitate serendipitous discovery by providing physical resources and spaces that inspire and educate. The library user brings the other prerequisite: the student is open to inspiration and learning, they likely already have themes and ideas on which they are working, and, crucially, they are able to make useful connections between their ideas and the resources they find – to see the value in them. Serendipitous discovery, as a form of embodied learning, is a powerful concept in creative education:

“The way my words yearn to be embodied, visceral, pulled from the mind’s dull corridors to the world’s bright flesh.” (Scott Harris, 2012)

Embodiment is a phenomenological term used to denote to our subjective selves; the ways in which we perceive the world are intrinsically linked to our surroundings, including our body and social presence, our perception, meaning making, and knowing (Hook, 2025:xix). Batacharya (2010 cited in Stewart, 2018:280) describes embodied learning as “a deepening of one’s awareness of sentient-social lived experience.” Her work highlights how our experiences of our own and other people’s bodies are shaped by social location, dominant discourses, and the material realities of space and time.

Creative arts students are intensely curious, “browsing omnivorously” in a gestural way that is particular to their modes of self-expression. They may not always know what will be useful or inspiring during their research, so to enhance their potential for creativity, they may acquire an ample and diverse range of physical sources, images, and inspiration. Part of the thrill of research is in the bodily “rummaging”, “not knowing” what one might find. This opens the student to the serendipity of encounters with inspiring images, sounds, experiences, and words; the opportunity to get their hands on “the stuff” to tumble it about in hand or brain, to be able to touch, feel, listen to, and unspool an idea (Woodall, 2017:133-134).

The materiality of text has continually changed as the substrates of reading, writing, and making extend beyond paper to the glimmer of screens and digital devices (Mills *et al.*, 2023:85-86). Despite the changes in research format, the movement, position, and sense of the body's place in the world are still critical to how we engage with text, information, and knowledge (Haas and McGrath, 2018). The librarian as a custodian and educator plays an important role in facilitating students' access to knowledge. They are a gatekeeper between the dual worlds of the body and mind, creating an organised space for bodies to drift through ambiguity. The librarian's invisible labour is to choreograph books and people into orderly circulation as books and people travel between the liminal spaces of intellectual production and social activity (Haines, 2021:77-79).

By catalysing this form of embodiment, the art library achieves what Ludovico (2024:169) describes as the physicality and gestural sharing of knowledge that is the antithesis of the isolated download. The art library provides a limited, slow, and concentrated experience of reading and learning as an alternative to the infinite automated torrent of digital fragments that today's creative arts students experience.

Addressing the Tensions Between the Material and the Machine

Despite the joy and creative development unique to engaging with library print collections, AI-enhanced internet search engines remain tantalising in their speed and directness because they enable the researcher to feel certainty faster than the embodied process of browsing the library stacks. Burton (cited in Small and Schmutte, 2022:25) notes that “certainty can approach the power of addiction” whereas “the brain dislikes uncertainty, regarding it as a type of pain” (Small and Schmutte, 2022:25), so it is natural that ambiguity often feels uncomfortable – and the reason embracing ambiguity is so important to creativity. Faced with ambiguity, our brains are challenged to find answers: “only in the absence of certainty can we have open-mindedness, mental flexibility, and willingness to contemplate alternative ideas” (Burton cited in Small and Schmutte, 2022:25). Learning to navigate and embrace ambiguity is therefore essential to creative education, because it will equip and empower students to explore “the unknown” (Small and Schmutte, 2022:43) where they will discover new ideas that enable them to produce more innovative artwork and research.

Kockelman (2024:78-79) demonstrates this by contrasting the embodied, spoken, or assembled word with the wordlessness that is produced by large language model tools such as ChatGPT. These tools create “horizontal relations among words, as opposed to [human-made] relations between words and worlds”. As such, these artificially “intelligent” tools are designed to represent words in texts, and/or patterned relations among such words. This kind of “nextword” prediction constructs useful and optimised text but not necessarily the truthful or tacit knowledge that spills messily from brain to hand to keyboard in the embodied and human sense. Book spine poetry functions in direct opposition to this.

The Book Spine Poetry Workshop

Book spine poetry is “a found poetry technique where books are arranged so their titles create a poem” (Hilles and Robbins, 2024:142). As an embodied activity, the book spine poetry workshop engages students in ambiguity and serendipitous discovery through browsing library stacks. Students peruse the bookshelves, selecting book titles and arranging three to five of them into book spine poems. They then use these poems to inspire a visual response: this could be a collage or mood board exploring ideas at the beginning of a project, or it could inspire a student’s whole project. In the third iteration of Hilles and Robbins’ (2024) book spine poetry workshop, Miami University’s Advanced Drawing students used their book spine poems as inspiration for their first graded assignment of the module.

Browsing is a central part of the book spine poetry workshop and a key proponent for inspiration seeking, serendipitous discovery, and embodied learning (Peterson, 2019:3-4; Peterson, 2020:87). Exploring the art library’s print collection by wandering the stacks, pulling books from shelves, and flipping through them is where learning intersects with the physical environment and with material objects. Students confront ambiguity when searching for titles for their book spine poems, considering the possible answers to questions such as “Which books should I choose?” “What ideas would I like my poem to convey?” “How do these titles make me feel?” And, hopefully, when students read a book title that sparks an interesting connection with another they have selected, they will experience serendipitous discovery.

Ideally, students participate in this workshop early in the process of generating ideas for an assignment. This creates an opportunity for students to encounter and select book titles which relate to ideas they may already have for their upcoming assignment. For example, UCA Digital Marketing and Social Media undergraduates participated in a book spine poetry workshop, treating their poems as speculative brand slogans. The librarian encouraged them to reflect on how their chosen titles evoked mood, symbolism, humour, contradiction, emotion, and narrative (Bell, 2026).

Students are still teasing through multiple interpretations of and approaches to their ideas at this early part of the creative process, which can be seen as a liminal stage (Meyer & Land, 2005). Finding book titles that connect with their pre-existing ideas at this time, or that help spark new ideas, means the early intervention of the book spine poetry workshop can teach students the value of browsing the library stacks as an embodied form of research.

The activity of arranging and rearranging their selected titles until they are satisfied with their book spine poems encourages students to consider more than one interpretation of one selection of words and phrases. This, again, encourages them to engage with ambiguity, and helps them to become more comfortable with it. As Hilles and Robbins (2024) recognise, for creative arts students who likely “do not consider themselves poets or writers [...] The creation of poems with book titles [does] not carry with it the burden of their artistic reputation and identity.” This makes the book spine poetry workshop a low-stakes activity for engaging with ambiguity. By testing multiple

arrangements of their titles before deciding on the final structure of their poem, they practise the skill of exploring multiple approaches to a creative project. This can help students strengthen their relationship with ambiguity; by gaining experience with it, they become better equipped to embrace it in future research and creative practice (Small and Schmutte, 2022).

Furthermore, pulling books from the stacks and arranging them into poems is an embodied task, requiring students to interact with the print collection in a thoughtful, tactile way that highlights the relationship between the mind and body in creative research. Poetry sits at the nexus of oral and written language: it needs to be spoken and heard, to be *embodied*. It functions with the visceral quality of spoken language, and its performative nature incorporates attention to cadence, rhythm, sound, voice, and breath (Stewart, 2018:290-291). Using the poem as inspiration for a creative task or assignment teaches students that engaging with the art library's print collection can be a valuable part of their creative process, particularly emphasising that library research can be a catalyst for creative work.

Conclusion

In *Knowing Her Place*, poet and qualitative researcher Lorri Neilsen Glenn (1998:264) conceptualises research as “the attuned mind/body working purposefully to explore, to listen, to support, to transgress, to gather with care, to create, to disrupt, and to offer back, to contribute, sometimes all at once”. This expansive and embodied understanding of research helps situate ambiguity as a generative and necessary force for meaning making within creative education. It recognises that learning does not take place exclusively through linear processes, but also emerges through the relational, sensory, and slow engagements within academic environments such as the art library.

Crucially, embodied learning within such environments cultivates slower and more deliberate forms of engagement, enabling students to dwell in uncertainty and develop deeper critical and creative capacities. The book spine poetry workshop exemplifies this, demonstrating how the art library facilitates embodied learning, fostering engagement with ambiguity through serendipitous discovery during the creative process.

Therefore, the renewed engagement with print media and analogue practices found in the library should not be dismissed as a nostalgic regression or a Luddite response to digitalisation and generative technologies. Rather, it signals a pedagogical reorientation. As Rauch (2022:9) observes, “print, analogue and other nondigital forms of Slow Media provide a glimpse of another culture that was, is, and will be possible – a culture [and learning experience] guided by the quality of human lives”. As technologies evolve and change the academy, the art library safeguards embodied learning and thus remains an indispensable environment for creative education, exploration, and inspiration.

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