

Megan Lotts

# Building bridges, creating partnerships, and elevating the Arts

## The Rutgers University Art Library Exhibition Spaces

**W**hen I began my position as Art librarian for the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL), I was looking for ways to connect with the departments with which I liaise. I also wanted the Art Library to further engage the Rutgers and local communities by elevating the scholarly research happening in the Arts across the Rutgers campuses. Because of my role as a liaison to the departments of Art History, Landscape Architecture, and the Visual Arts, I was interested in

innovative ways to connect with the faculty, students, and staff from these departments.

From my own experiences as an artist, and my previous work curating the Morris Library Rotunda Art Space at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, I knew that space for showing artwork on a college campus is a limited resource, and can be a great way to connect with the overall campus community as well as a way to promote crossdisciplinary

collaboration. In addition, having been a Fine Arts student for eight years prior to receiving my MLIS, I knew that many students studying the Arts are not privy to the value of academic libraries and that one way to get these students into the libraries is by providing

exhibition spaces for the viewing and display of artworks.

In February 2013, I revitalized and began curating the Rutgers University Art Library Exhibition spaces (RALES) located on the main floor of the



Figure 1. Rutgers Art Library Exhibition Space. Photo by Megan Lotts.

building (see Figure 1). In two and a half years, this teaching gallery has hosted 27 exhibitions by students, faculty, and staff of the Rutgers campuses, as well as a few local and out-of-state artists. There has been little

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cost other than time required to curate the space, and most of the resources used to hang the work have been provided by the artists. This space was created not only to connect with my liaison departments, but also to help students learn what goes into an exhibition, from creation of the work to its public viewing, marketing, and reception. This space also provides an opportunity for individuals to view artworks in person, as opposed to studying an image in a book.

But perhaps one of the most impactful aspects of RALES is that it has created a deeper connection to individuals within the Arts in addition to building new bridges

across the campuses and introducing RUL to many new potential partnerships.

### The Rutgers Art Library Exhibition Spaces

RALES are galleries run at little fiscal cost. The physical space consists of two 8-foot tall walls. One wall is 26 feet long and the other 13 feet long. The track system used to hang artwork is older but suffices for present exhibitions, using “S” hooks and wire or fishing line. The Art Library also has four exhibition cases with working locks. Artwork is also located in nontraditional spaces throughout the Art Library, as long as the installation does not cause damage to the walls or produce a fire hazard. In the case of artist Ojore Lutalo (see Figure 2), he used a lower wall at the entrance of the Art Library to display work for an exhibit in conjunction with *Marking Time:*

*Prison Arts and Activism Conference.*<sup>1</sup> The Art Library has also hosted digital exhibits on the E-display, which can also be an interesting way to highlight work created by artist in a digital format.

Each individual artist or collaboration of artists is responsible for installation and de-installation of their artwork, and sign a waiver noting that RUL are not liable if something were to happen to their work. Thus far

the exhibition spaces have had no issues of theft or vandalism. However a few pieces of artwork have fallen off the wall and had to be re-hung.

Exhibitors are encouraged to submit a press release and

an artist’s statement if they so desire. These documents are used for publicity on the RUL social media sites and sent out to the Art Library listserv, which compiles the contacts of individuals and organizations who are stakeholders in the arts on the Rutgers campuses and in the state of New Jersey. I provide support when creating press releases and publicity if necessary.

In one instance, I worked closely with Toni Eisman, a sophomore from the Rutgers Mason Gross School of Visual Arts (MGVA) for her untitled exhibition of paintings. As this was her first solo exhibition, she had no prior experience in preparing the required documents, and also needed physical assistance in helping hang her paintings (see figure 3). Eisman showing her work in the Art Library, introduced many MGVA students to RALES, which has inspired further connections be-



Figure 2. Work by Ojore Lutalo. Photo by Megan Lotts.

tween the students and myself, as well as built stronger ties between the Art Library and the students we serve.

Following her exhibit at the Rutgers University Art Library (RUAL), Eisman was invited to show her work at the Kilmer Library Exhibition Space.

The publicity created for each exhibition, including images of the art works, are used in the RALES research guide, which documents past exhibits and events that have happened in RUAL.<sup>2</sup>

This guide is a collaborative guide created by me and often maintained by the Art Library intern. The Art Library internship is a position that provides an opportunity for graduate students



Figure 3. Toni Eisman, sophomore from the Rutgers Mason Gross School of Visual Arts. Photo by Megan Lotts

in library school to add a line to their curriculum vitae by learning the LibGuides content management system as well as learning how to curate a library gallery space and create their own exhibition.

### Finding artists and curators

Finding artists and curators for the exhibitions at the library was initially slow. However, once the space had a few exhibits and some good publicity, it was much easier to find individuals who were looking to share their work. In the case of RALES, the space became more popular as I began talking it up the space while working with students and faculty. But it was the exhibit *SIGHT/SITE* by

Jennifer Burkhalter, then in her second year in the master's degree program at Rutgers Department of Landscape Architecture, whose work was instrumental in putting RALES on the Rutgers map. Burkhalter installed large charcoal drawings, three-dimensional collages, and mixed media pieces that were a study of the Yew Garden located at Rutgers Gardens (see Figure 4). At the reception for this exhibit, roughly 25 individuals from the Landscape Architecture Department (LAD) attended and

learned more about Burkhalter's work as well as about many of the other materials and services found in RUAL. Following Burkhalter's reception, the *Daily Targum*, the local campus

newspaper, ran a piece "*SIGHT/SITE* exhibit looks at U. nature" by Sabrina Restivo.<sup>3</sup> In addition following the exhibition, the Art librarian was approached by three more graduate students from LAD to exhibit their work at RALES.

Burkhalter's exhibit was one of the first strong connections I was able to make with LAD, which has since led to a larger collaborative project with Legos, starting embedded reference hours within the department, as well as serving as a member of a recent LAD faculty search committee.

After hosting multiple exhibits and needing some fresh artists, on July 1, 2014, I sent out a "call to artists" email, which included a

fact sheet about RALES on the dimensions of the space and images of the walls and exhibition cases. The email was sent out via the Art Library listserv as well as the RUL listserv with hopes that all the RUL liaisons, faculty, and staff would distribute widely. Within hours of sending the email, I began getting inquiries about RALES, and within one week, the September 2014-August 2015 exhibition series was scheduled. Since the “call to artists” sent out in 2014, I have been able to populate the exhibitions spaces without sending out additional calls. In short, now that RALES has become an active and popular place to view static and nonstatic forms of art, I am beginning to see an increase in engagement with the departments I liaise, as well a



Figure 4. Reception for *SIGHT/SITE* by Jennifer Burkhalter. Photo by Megan Lotts.

new population of individuals that would not generally visit the Art Library. Regularly individuals and organizations from the Rutgers community contact the Art Library in hopes to form new partnerships that help elevate the scholarly research being created in the Arts.

### **Building liaison relationships and connecting to the greater campus community**

RALES have been an excellent way to connect to departments with which I liaise, and to the greater Rutgers campus community. The spaces have provided an opportunity for students in the Visual Arts and the Landscape

Architecture department to exhibit their work. However RALES has also provided many opportunities for Art History students, faculty, and staff to come to the library to view and discuss the works of art on display. In one instance, RALES hosted the exhibit *From Island to Ocean: Caribbean and Pacific Dialogues*, by Juana Valdes and Fidalis Buehler, in collaboration with the Rutgers Center for Cultural Analysis (CCA). It was only because of the partnership with CCA that we were able to host this exhibit, because the Art Library does not have a budget to pay for the cost of

shipping art work. However with funding provided by CCA and space provided by the Art Library, we were able to host the exhibit and an accompanying daylong

symposium, including talks by the artists.

One graduate student from the Art History Department noted, “Valdes work is quite charming, and it’s nice to see the Art Library host installation art for a change.” These exhibits have also been a way to connect and engage with individuals on campus who might not otherwise visit the Art Library, such as individuals from the CCA.

Since February 2013, RALES has hosted 27 exhibitions. In one instance, I was approached by Maria Voigt from the Research Collaboratory for Structural Bioinformatics (RCSB) consortium, who wanted to show an exhibit using images and information from

the Protein Data Bank Archive.<sup>4</sup> *The Art of Science* was an outstanding example combining the Arts and Sciences, and highlighted the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math learning on the Rutgers campuses. The exhibition included a hands-on activity in which viewers were able to build their own protein by using supplies and directions provided by the RCSB (see figure 5).

The reception brought in more than 40 scientists to RUAL, and for many of them, this was their first time visiting the Art Library. Following the exhibition, myself and the Rutgers Chemistry and Physics Librarian Laura Palumbo were invited to tour the RCSB, a space neither of us had visited before, to meet many of the individuals who worked within this consortium on the Rutgers campuses and contributed to the exhibit. Not only did the Art Library benefit from hosting this exhibit, but so did Palumbo, who was able to further connect with individuals with whom she is a library liaison.

Lastly, RALES has been a catalyst in forming the Rutgers Kilmer Library Exhibition Spaces and providing many experiences for the Art Library interns (AKA future librarians), to learn more about developing partnerships, and curating and preparing exhibitions for a library.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, RALES have expanded con-

ventional ideas of how gallery space can function in an academic library. RALES has been an exciting way to connect with the greater campus community and has created many new partnerships for RUL within the Rutgers community as well as the greater city of New Brunswick.

Hosting exhibitions in the library can be a way for library liaisons to form deeper connections with the individuals and departments they work with, as well as learn more about the research needs of their students, faculty, and staff. RALES has also shown

that one does not need a lot of money to have an exhibition space, but one does need time and labor, as well as an individual to coordinate the space.

Above all, however, the RALES have

provided an opportunity to embrace the ephemeral experience of studying the arts, which is something that a book cannot provide.

## Notes

1. Institute for Women on Research, <http://irw.rutgers.edu/programs/conferences>.
2. Megan Lotts, Rutgers University Art Library, <http://libguides.rutgers.edu/event-sandexhibits>.
3. Sabrina Restivo, "SIGHT/SITE exhibit looks at U. nature," *The Daily Targum*, February 10, 2014, [www.dailytargum.com/article/2014/02/sightsite-exhibit-looks-at-u-nature](http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2014/02/sightsite-exhibit-looks-at-u-nature).
4. RCSB Protein Data Bank, [www.rcsb.org/pdb/home/home.do](http://www.rcsb.org/pdb/home/home.do). *RL*



Figure 5. Build your own protein and reception from the Protein Data Bank exhibition. Photo by Megan Lotts.