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The Naming of Things: Collaboration and Creative Reuse

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to encourage the use of visual collections as a tool for community engagement and visual literacy. Using the example of a collaborative exhibition between the New York Public Library Picture Collection and Pratt Institute, it highlights the potential of engaging new communities by utilizing already-available resources in new or unexpected ways.

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Author Bio & Acknowledgements

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Caskets are called COFFINS. GIANTS are both fairytale and real. Knives are under CUTLERY. UNIFORMS are everything except those worn by the military.[1] These are just a few of the naming conventions used by the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library (NYPL). Established in 1915, the Picture Collection grew in response to the requests of library users who needed pictures of things, but not necessarily as depicted in a fine art print. Early records from the collection note requests for cork trees, a man swinging an ax, and the burning of Rome by Nero.[2] Librarians at the time began clipping from discarded books and magazines to create files of pictures grouped together by subject content. This fueled the visual and inspirational needs of artists in the burgeoning advertising, film, and publishing industries in New York City. These types of requests allowed the collection to collaborate with its users to develop the subject classifications used by the Picture Collection.

User input still influences changes to its naming conventions and subject choices today. With around 12,000 subjects to choose from, librarians strive to organize each image objectively for subject content, but subjective decisions are inevitable during classification. These choices have broad but subtle implications for how users interact with these visual materials. This paper will look at how cross-institutional collaboration serves the artists, designers, historians, and students who seek visual information in the Picture Collection today by continuing to ask for user participation in the way we catalog pictures.

This case study will look at one such user interaction with the collection in the form of an exhibition about naming things, or assigning subject headings, in the Picture Collection. The idea was conceived during a visit to the library by a Curatorial Practices class from the Pratt Institute's Photography Department in the spring of 2017. It was led by adjunct professor Peter Kayafas who is also a photographer and the Director of Eakins Press. The exhibition surfaced the way the Picture Collection gives images subject headings; this effort to highlight the subtle but consequential act of categorization formed the nexus of the presentation of works and the interactive components. The class developed and displayed the exhibition, called *The Naming of Things,* in the fall of 2017 at the Pratt Institute Photography Gallery in Brooklyn, NY.[3] It became a collaborative project between institutions that in turn fostered narrower engagement within different sections of the same institution, NYPL. The impetus for this project and the creative reuse of images and collections was to promote visual literacy across the library and to encourage the community to consider the large amounts of visual information they view and interpret every day.

The class gave the students the opportunity to gain insight into the workings of the Picture Collection: how it is organized, where the materials come from, how materials are chosen for inclusion, and the service rationale behind the classification process. With this information, they mounted an exhibition that celebrated as well as asked new questions of the Collection and invited the public's interaction. The group of students took 30 images from the Picture Collection - 15 named with subjects by Picture Collection librarians, 15 unnamed (or yet to be assigned subjects) - and asked visitors to the exhibition to classify the unnamed images under 25 different subject headings using iPads on stands distributed around the gallery area. A software application (app) was purpose-designed to facilitate this interactive experience. The exercise spoke to the subjective nature of pictures, and the many different ways to read an image. Analysis of user interaction with the app

showed wide variation in the selection of subjects chosen by individuals to represent an image. Of the 25 headings available to describe a picture, between 15 and 23 headings were chosen by at least one person for each picture. Often there were two or three choices that received almost equal votes. The data collected demonstrates the varying ways people see and interpret pictures. The aggregate data from the duration of the exhibition at Pratt Institute was saved and provided to the Picture Collection.
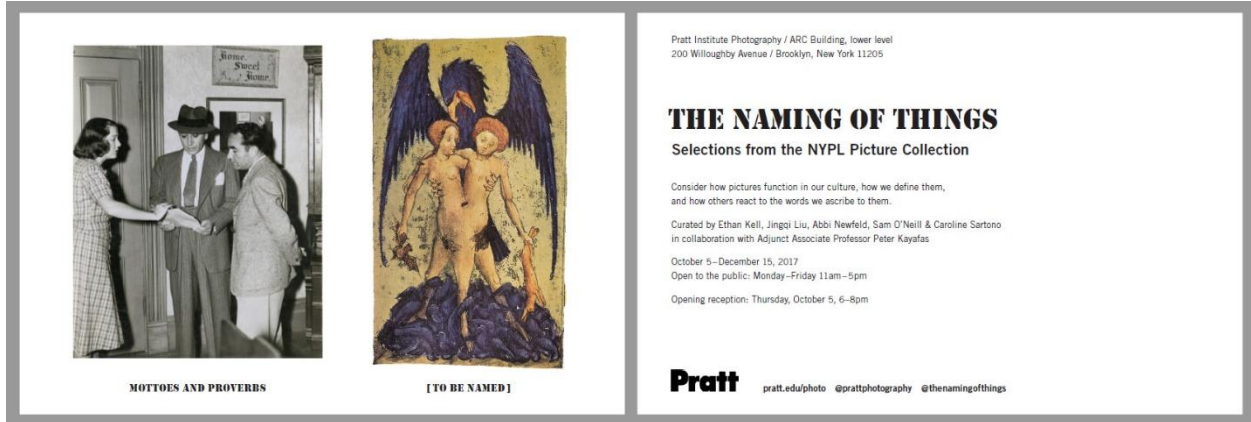
Pratt Institute, "The Naming of Things" exhibition card, 2017 (see Appendix A)

When the exhibition closed in December 2017, Professor Kayafas offered it for display in the library. It was a ready-made exhibit with professionally framed objects whose content was drawn from an NYPL collection and whose mission was to promote visual literacy and engender reflection on what viewers see when we look at a picture. This already-realized project became the springboard for a new way to perform outreach for the Picture Collection. It repurposed the efforts put forth by the Pratt Institute students by furthering awareness of the collection to a larger community and supporting and encouraging the reading of images. As a bonus, this exhibition also allowed for discovery and curiosity outside the conventional practice of the library.

In the NYPL system, each branch hosts programming that can be drawn from the central programming office or developed locally at individual locations. The NYPL consists of 88 neighborhood branch libraries and four scholarly research libraries. For the Picture Collection collaborating with another NYPL branch on the Pratt Institute exhibition project would allow for new and unexpected ways to draw people effectively and consistently to programs, reach new audiences, and get the community to think differently about visual information. The first challenge when reaching out to these other locations was how to get other people on board with exhibiting the material. Initial efforts to find physical space to host the exhibit were undertaken through emails and in-person conversations. The largest obstacle to making the exhibition work in a non-traditional gallery setting was the physical space of many branch libraries. Library buildings are often repurposed spaces not designed with generous open wall space for hanging pictures.

In May 2018 the Manager of the Grand Central Library branch of NYPL, William Hall, gave a presentation at a staff training that focused on reaching out to colleagues across the library for programming and how to overcome the "scarcity mindset," or the unwillingness to take risks because you are used to being told "no" over and over.[4] Hall's encouragement around working with

colleagues across the institution revitalized the effort needed to find the right location for the Pratt Institute exhibition. An opportunity to build a connection between the Picture Collection and the general public in a branch location came a few months later when the Grand Central Library had an opening in its exhibition schedule. From Hall's point of view, this type of collaboration served as an active way to use resources freely available, while also shaping the program to the needs of his community. In a 2019 un-conference presentation at NYPL, he stated:

> As a manager and former adult librarian/programmer, I feel one of my primary responsibilities is to make sure my branch is offering dynamic programs for all ages. Of the specialties, adult programming has traditionally received the least financial support. Best practices have been the hardest to refine because of the diversity of the adult population we aim to serve, the demands on the adult specialist's time, and the "catch as catch can" programming opportunities that present themselves. Actively pursuing collaboration and working to make collaborative programming across our branches and research divisions a part of the culture, should help to make the task of offering great programming less random, more fulfilling, and more cost effective.[5]
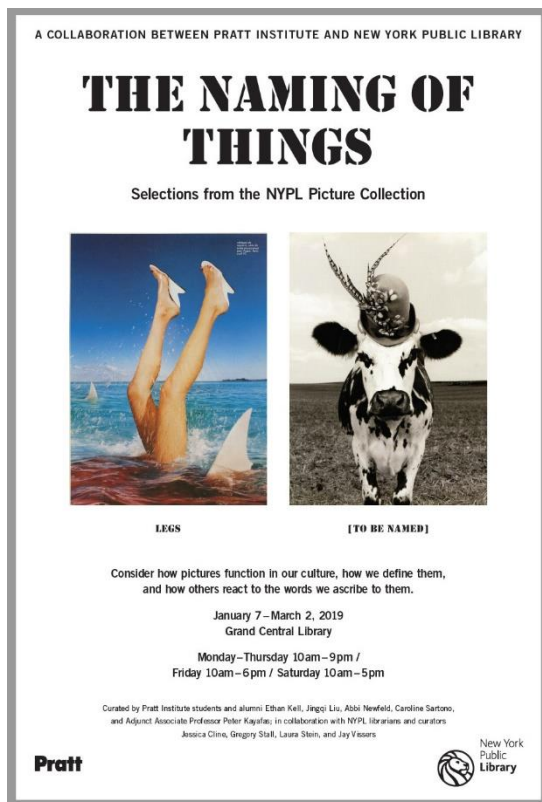
Grand Central Library, NYPL poster, 2019 (see Appendix B)

The wall space at Grand Central Library allowed for viewers to fully walk up to the pictures, but existing shelving and tables required adjustments for the exhibition concept in a non-traditional gallery space. Our solution was to downsize the number of images to 13, and then hang them in every-other fashion: an unnamed picture between two pictures that were already assigned subject headings. Other measures included involving the branch staff so they could answer inquiries about the pictures, and at the very least, direct people across town to the Picture Collection in a different building. We made handouts explaining the Picture Collection and, most importantly, we scheduled times for a Picture Collection staff member and one of the Pratt student curators to be available for tours and general outreach at the Grand Central Library. Additionally, the wall text for the exhibition at the Grand Central Library clearly stated our objective in promoting library resources:

> The nature of the cataloging process, essentially subjective from the point of view of individual staff members, allows for both predictable and delightfully unpredictable results…. By engaging in the cataloging process that the library staff has employed for more than a century, audience members will gain a greater

appreciation for how images function in our culture, how we define them, and how others react to the definitions we ascribe to them.[6]

We invited the public to take part in the cataloging process and to take a moment to consider how materials are chosen for the collections, as well as to learn about the existence of a resource they may not have known was there. Visitors responded with feedback that they would like to see more of this kind of exhibition and that they enjoyed the curator tour and being able to ask questions of a Picture Collection staff member. Branch staff noted that the exhibition engaged individuals who wanted to interact with it, yet was undisruptive to visitors who came to the location for other purposes (i.e. to use a computer or check out a book). Furthermore, Grand Central Library staff have all since sought further engagement with the NYPL Research Library collections for collaborative programming initiatives.

Questions that were considered when mounting this exhibition included: how to direct interested patrons to the Picture Collection from a different building on the other side of town; how do we help a collaborative partner promote the exhibition; what best practices could be used again and again; and what would make the whole process easier for future collaborations. As part of the exhibition, we made a pamphlet that included a map and contact information for both the Grand Central Library location and the Picture Collection location.[7] These were available to the public at both locations for the duration of the exhibition. Both locations also engaged the public through social media efforts on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook through library accounts. We created a webpage within the NYPL's website (nypl.org) as well as a poster to hang on the front window of the Grand Central Library, introducing the exhibition to passersby on the street. It proved essential to have a point person to follow each step of the process; to have manager support at each location for staff scheduling changes during installation and programming; to have clear guidelines for hanging materials, measurements, and labeling for stream-lined installation; and to have open and responsive communication between collaborating partners.

In the final iteration of this project, we hope to bring the base idea of the interaction with the Picture Collection and library work of assigning subject headings back to the public within the physical location of the Picture Collection. We have approached this in two ways: through workshops open to the public and through the proposal of a permanent installation of the proprietary application software (app)[8] in the room. The patron's interactions with the app on an iPad would help demonstrate how the library can be used as a discovery tool for learning, to create community conversations with materials, and aid in outreach to new users.

The app provides a unique entry point into the Picture Collection by offering a way to discover how words, or subject headings, are assigned to pictures. The exploration of the subjective nature of cataloging within the library, as well as labeling a picture to represent a concept, forces the viewer to slow down and explore her first impression and what is being communicated by the image. The app allows the viewer to consider what she sees and state an opinion about it. Her reading of the image then allows for comparison, and a sense of community with other picture users, by seeing the aggregate data results of other people reading and assigning a subject heading to the same image.

We are particularly interested in the way that a participant can use her interaction with the digital image to move into the physical collection. Having an element of the exhibition continue within the library demonstrates a proprietary presence within the collection's home space. The patron is invited to experience an entire folder of images with the same subject heading, which supports NYPL's initiative to get more people reading more. She is inspired to learn more about a subject, use the image to create something, or compare her ideas to others in the community who have looked at and responded to the same image. The availability of a small number of images (15) on the iPad with corresponding possibilities for subject headings would also offer a foundation for the evolution of the interactive element to include the entire subject heading catalog of the Picture Collection in the future. The patron could use her subject heading choice as a way to dig deeper into relational headings that can expand how she looks at an image and relates it to another in unexpected ways. The physical pictures in the collection would become touch points to each other through each patron's unique reading. The pictures would work to represent the individual point of view away from their original context, while simultaneously drawing themselves to like concepts and juxtapositions. Eventually, this process could extend outward to other NYPL collections or other institutions. This process is still in development, with a need to locate funding and IT buy-in to provide institutional support for the software.

Where does the collaborative effort of providing exhibitions to NYPL branch locations go from here? The engagement in the naming of pictures through the app was more successful in the Pratt setting than at the Grand Central Library. Factors that may have affected this include the availability of full-time gallery staff for assistance, the number of iPads available (four at Pratt, one at Grand Central), and use of space (dedicated and visited strictly as a gallery vs. a general-use library space). As we continue to grow our exhibition outreach program across the branches of the library, we will need a system to track the success of the project. This may be a survey that asks visitors to our room how they learned about us or a comment book at an exhibition location. The feedback is essential to informing future innovation projects and deciding how to allocate budgets, as well as making connections between the library community in the form of events and exhibitions, and designing best practices and workflows for exhibition collaborations (standardized exhibition labels, dynamic design options like wall vinyl, standard packing crates, and a shared calendar to ease planning). Other things to consider include having a point person in departments such as marketing, communications, and IT to offer advice when needed and to provide mentorship from people who have had successes to other staff.

This exhibition exemplifies collaborative work with a partner, first outside our institution and later, within the institution, that was successfully realized because it was mutually beneficial to all parties. The Pratt Institute photography students got a practical learning experience. The Grand Central Library received a programming opportunity that engaged their community in a new way. The public was informed of the library resources available to them and how the library works, as well as given a chance to interact with quality visual material. The Picture Collection was able to outreach the collection to new communities at Pratt Institute and Grand Central Library to promote visual literacy and library materials. Looking ahead, bringing visual materials outside of their physical collection space and asking people their thoughts on what they see encourages a literate public,

creates an engaged user-group that takes ownership in the library collection, and forms partnership opportunities for years to come.

Notes:

1. *Picture Collection Subject Headings Cross-References*, Picture Collection, New York Public Library.
2. Picture Collection Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, accessed November 2017.
3. William Sperring Hall, "Big Ideas, Modest Means: Collaboration @ NYPL," (Presentation, Managing Conference, New York Public Library, New York, NY, April 2018).
4. *The Naming of Things* (exhibition), Brooklyn: Pratt Institute, organized and presented by Pratt Photography Gallery and Ethan Kell, Jingqi Liu, Abbi Newfeld, and Caroline Sartono in collaboration with Adjunct Associate Professor Peter Kayafas, October 5 - December 15, 2017.
5. William Sperring Hall, Gregory Stall, and Jessica Cline, "Snapshot of a Collaboration: The Picture Collection at Grand Central," (presentation, Unconference FY19, New York Public Library, New York, NY, May 22, 2019).
6. Peter Kayafas, "The Naming of Things: Selections from the NYPL Picture Collection," New York: Grand Central Library, 2018, wall text.
7. Gregory Stall, "The Naming of Things: Selection from the NYPL Picture Collection," 2018, exhibition pamphlet.
8. Larry Larson and Larson Associates, "Naming of Things," app, developed September 2017.

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Hall, William Sperring, Gregory Stall, and Jessica Cline. "Snapshot of a Collaboration: The Picture Collection at Grand Central." (Presentation, Unconference FY19. New York Public Library, New York, NY. May 22, 2019).

Kayafas, Peter. "The Naming of Things: Selections from the NYPL Picture Collection." New York: Grand Central Library, 2018. Wall text.

Picture Collection Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. Accessed November 2017.

Picture Collection Subject Headings Cross-References. Picture Collection, New York Public Library.

Appendix A

MOTTOES AND PROVERBS
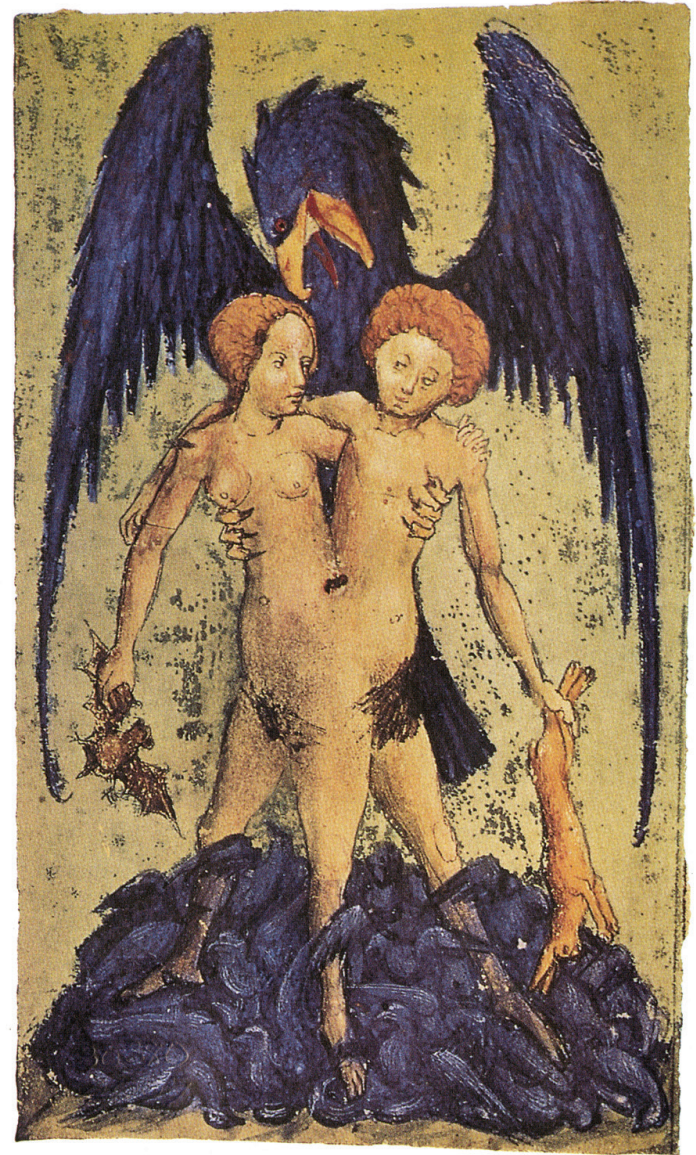
[TO BE NAMED]

THE NAMING OF THINGS

Selections from the NYPL Picture Collection

Consider how pictures function in our culture, how we define them,
and how others react to the words we ascribe to them.

Curated by Ethan Kell, Jingqi Liu, Abbi Newfeld, Sam O'Neill & Caroline Sartono
in collaboration with Adjunct Associate Professor Peter Kayafas

October 5–December 15, 2017
Open to the public: Monday–Friday 11am–5pm

Opening reception: Thursday, October 5, 6–8pm

Pratt

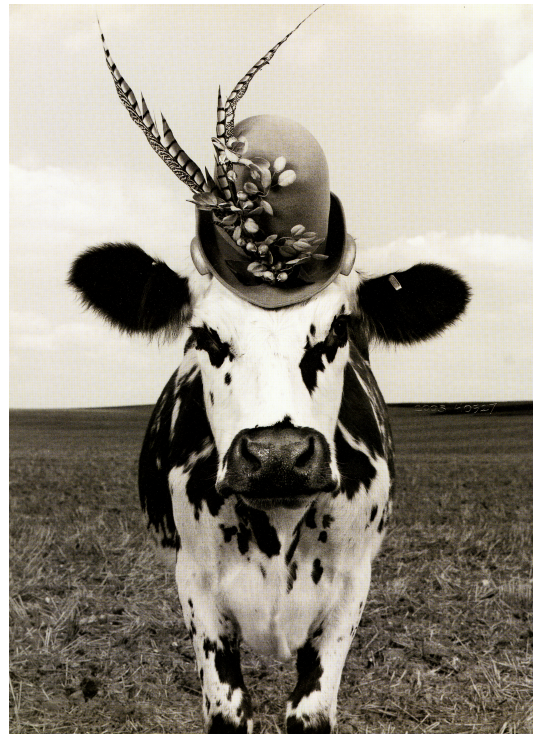pratt.edu/photo   @prattphotography   @thenamingofthings

Appendix B

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN PRATT INSTITUTE AND NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

THE NAMING OF THINGS

Selections from the NYPL Picture Collection

«Attaque de requins», série de mode (accessoires) pour Vogue, Paris, avril 97.

LEGS

[TO BE NAMED]

Consider how pictures function in our culture, how we define them, and how others react to the words we ascribe to them.

January 7 – March 2, 2019
Grand Central Library

Monday – Thursday 10am – 9pm /
Friday 10am – 6pm / Saturday 10am – 5pm

Curated by Pratt Institute students and alumni Ethan Kell, Jingqi Liu, Abbi Newfeld, Caroline Sartono, and Adjunct Associate Professor Peter Kayafas; in collaboration with NYPL librarians and curators Jessica Cline, Gregory Stall, Laura Stein, and Jay Vissers

Pratt

New York
Public
Library