

Collaborative cataloguing now!

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the “Collaborative Cataloguing Now!” workshop held at CILIP MDG’s March 2026 conference held in Bristol.

The workshop aimed to both enhance the discovery of resources at a library that is delivering services without a cataloguer, and to test our professional capacity to create good quality bibliographic metadata, without specialist tools.

Together, we catalogued resources for the publicly accessible Drawing Room Library in Bermondsey, London and these can be found in the online catalogue. This was nice to do but, it makes only a small dent in the library’s cataloguing to-do list. This article suggests, however, that the potential takeaways lie not so much in the results of this small intervention, but in its implications.

We catalogued these books using laptops, digital surrogates and access to a shared document drive. We created high-quality structured metadata that was easily imported into the Drawing Room’s library management system.

In a context of significant change in our field – with Official RDA and Bibframe developments looming – this article asks us to strip back our understanding of bibliographic description. It argues that wherever we do it and whichever tools we use, we bring the experience and expertise.

KEYWORDS collaborative cataloguing; cataloguing expertise; source of bibliographic metadata

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The library

I was working in a small, well-lit art library with someone else’s laptop and a pile of exhibition catalogues. The latter were diverse in age, size, shape and style. I was there to catalogue 500 of them into a basic library management system with no Z39.50 access.

I created a detailed MARC template and together with the gallery’s librarian we came up with approaches to some of the specialist fields. The librarian is responsible for the whole service and she is always busy, running projects that support the exhibition programming and local communities. She has little time for cataloguing.



Figure 1: Drawing Room Library

A successful Paul Mellon funding bid¹ brought me (on a freelance contract) to Drawing Room's library to catalogue these items for improved discoverability and to develop guidance for volunteers to continue the work (see [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#) for examples).



[Start](#)
[Search ▾](#)
[Lists ▾](#)
[My Account ▾](#)
[Help](#)

Lorna Simpson : works on paper

[← Return to Search](#)

Records ▾

Detail

Author:

Deavere Smith, Anna

Title Statement:

Lorna Simpson : works on paper

Published:

Aspen Aspen Art Press c2013

Items

	Item ID	Call Number	Location	Status
1. ☐	00003164 Media: Book Copy: 1	ARTISTS, SIM		Available for Circulation

Actions ▾

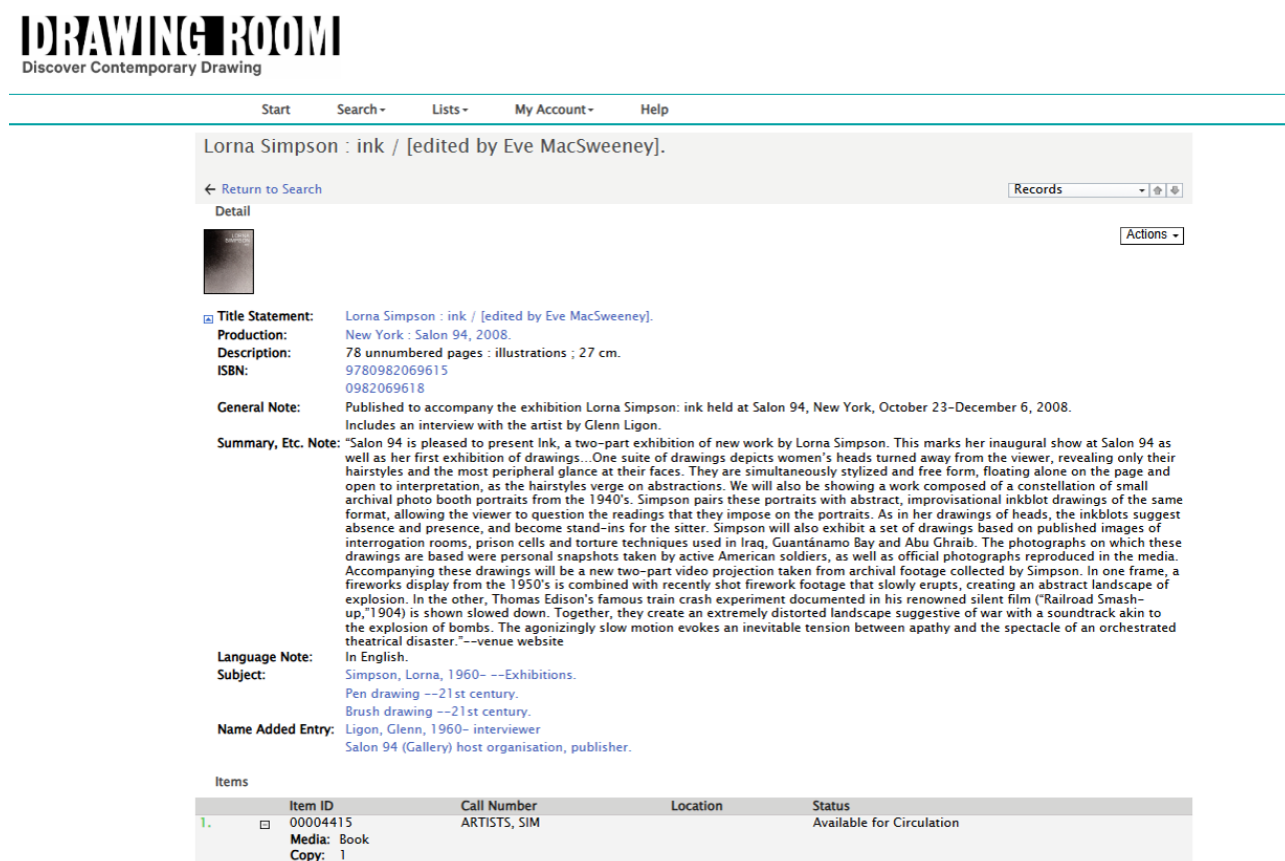
Figure 2: Example of basic metadata in user interface

I am used to cataloguing within a system that allows me to search for, and import, metadata and to check controlled vocabularies easily. Doing this manually was like stretching time. I'd find resources in Library Hub Discover and copy bits of metadata from different records where it proved useful. I typed a lot. I reformatted a lot. I

¹ For more information on the Paul Mellon funded cataloguing project see <https://drawingroom.org.uk/event/exhibitions-publications-cataloguing-project/>.

transcribed a lot. I searched through gallery websites and the art press for details. I used the open access end of Library of Congress Authorities for subjects and names of people, places, venues, publishers, prizes and events. Although most of the work was online it felt strikingly manual, clicking from site to database to system and back.

After a few weeks it struck me that I was enjoying myself. At times, I felt like I was combining the best of several records with information from the item-in-hand and relevant online sources... to make super records!



DRAWING ROOM
Discover Contemporary Drawing

Start Search Lists My Account Help

Lorna Simpson : ink / [edited by Eve MacSweeney].

← Return to Search Records Actions

Detail

Title Statement: Lorna Simpson : ink / [edited by Eve MacSweeney].
Production: New York : Salon 94, 2008.
Description: 78 unnumbered pages : illustrations ; 27 cm.
ISBN: 9780982069615
 0982069618

General Note: Published to accompany the exhibition Lorna Simpson: ink held at Salon 94, New York, October 23–December 6, 2008. Includes an interview with the artist by Glenn Ligon.

Summary, Etc. Note: "Salon 94 is pleased to present Ink, a two-part exhibition of new work by Lorna Simpson. This marks her inaugural show at Salon 94 as well as her first exhibition of drawings... One suite of drawings depicts women's heads turned away from the viewer, revealing only their hairstyles and the most peripheral glance at their faces. They are simultaneously stylized and free form, floating alone on the page and open to interpretation, as the hairstyles verge on abstractions. We will also be showing a work composed of a constellation of small archival photo booth portraits from the 1940's. Simpson pairs these portraits with abstract, improvisational inkblot drawings of the same format, allowing the viewer to question the readings that they impose on the portraits. As in her drawings of heads, the inkblots suggest absence and presence, and become stand-ins for the sitter. Simpson will also exhibit a set of drawings based on published images of interrogation rooms, prison cells and torture techniques used in Iraq, Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. The photographs on which these drawings are based were personal snapshots taken by active American soldiers, as well as official photographs reproduced in the media. Accompanying these drawings will be a new two-part video projection taken from archival footage collected by Simpson. In one frame, a fireworks display from the 1950's is combined with recently shot firework footage that slowly erupts, creating an abstract landscape of explosion. In the other, Thomas Edison's famous train crash experiment documented in his renowned silent film ("Railroad Smash-up," 1904) is shown slowed down. Together, they create an extremely distorted landscape suggestive of war with a soundtrack akin to the explosion of bombs. The agonizingly slow motion evokes an inevitable tension between apathy and the spectacle of an orchestrated theatrical disaster." --venue website

Language Note: In English.

Subject: Simpson, Lorna, 1960- --Exhibitions.
 Pen drawing --21st century.
 Brush drawing --21st century.

Name Added Entry: Ligon, Glenn, 1960- interviewer
 Salon 94 (Gallery) host organisation, publisher.

Items

	Item ID	Call Number	Location	Status
1.	00004415	ARTISTS, SIM		Available for Circulation
	Media: Book			
	Copy: 1			

Figure 3: Example of enriched metadata in user interface

I felt privileged to have the time to find names, language information, and exhibition descriptions to enrich the records. It is satisfying to know that this metadata is owned by this library and will be openly available should they one day sign up to Jisc's National Bibliographic Knowledgebase.

It was manual and yet also somehow empowering. I realised I could get everything I needed – albeit slowly – from MARC21, LCSH, Library Hub Discover, Getty Thesaurus and the many art organisations and publications out there online.

On my train home to Wales each week I would idly wonder whether other cataloguers would enjoy this work. How long would it take us to catalogue the whole collection – about 5000 items – under a free-to-use licence?

This is where the idea for the Collaborative Cataloguing Now workshop came from. The workshop formed an interactive session at the CILIP Metadata and Discovery Group conference in March in Bristol where 11 delegates joined me for a cataloguer's 'busman's holiday'.

The Workshop

I had created packs of images, templates and guidance for Drawing Room's Library items in need of cataloguing. I numbered these packs on a Google Documents site that delegates could access from their laptops (see [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#)).

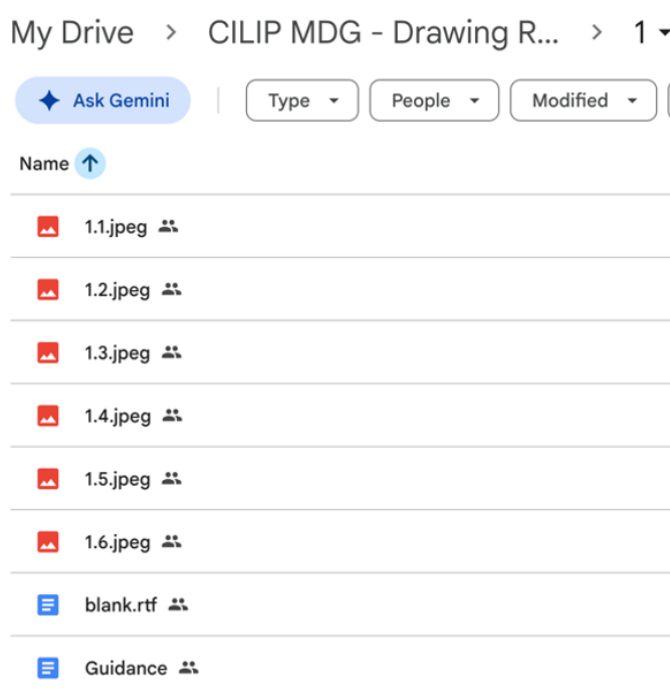


Figure 4: Pack 1 folder contents

Cataloguers worked together on each item in groups and created a MARC record in an .rtf (Rich Text Format) document. I later combined these in MarcEdit and sent the file to Mike, the library's LMS account manager, and he uploaded them to the catalogue for discovery.

We had an hour to do something quite unusual with people we didn't know. I'm grateful that everyone braced themselves and just went for it in spite of the strangeness, the technology making things tricky, and the brief time to get familiar with the task.

It was great to create records for Drawing Room (see below for examples to find in the catalogue) but the ultimate aim of the workshop was to test the idea of collaborative cataloguing itself and to see what other cataloguers think about it. The "real" results are best communicated via the answers to the below questions that I asked the delegates, in an email after the workshop.

```

=001
=003 UkLoDR
=008 xxxxxsyyyy\\lenka\\lcb\\001\\0\\eng\\d
=020 \\$a $q
=040 \\$aUkLoDR $beng $cUkLoDR $erda
=041 \\$aeng
=043 \\$a
=1xx x\\$a $e
=240 0\\$a
=245 10$a : $b / $c.
=246 1x$a
=264 1\\$a : $b , $c.
=300 \\$a : $b ; $ccm.
=336 \\$atext $btxt $2rdacontent
=336 \\$astill image $bsti $2rdacontent
=337 \\$aunmediated $bn $2rdamedia
=338 \\$avolume $bnc $2rdacarrier
=500 \\$aPublished to accompany the exhibition [x] held at [x], [place], [month
day-month-day, year].
=505 0\\$a
=520 \\$a
=546 \\$aln English.
=541 \\$a
=561 \\$a
=600 10$a $vExhibitions.
=650 10$a
=651 10$a
=655 17$aExhibition catalogs $2aat.
=700 1\\$a
=710 2\\$a

```

Figure 5: Blank .rtf working template

**Q.1 Were you surprised that you could do this work in such unusual circumstances?
How might you feel if you were to do it again?**

- No – it was fine. How might I feel if I were to do it again? Again – fine.
- Not really surprised but reminded that we can catalogue effectively with the knowledge we already have and fairly simple and free resources.
- I was surprised at how much I couldn't remember!
- Not particularly surprised – it was fine using scans to establish the information.
- I was surprised at how easy it was to start cataloguing together with a person whom I've never talked to nor met before. Although I am an English AFL [as foreign language, eds.] speaker, [MARC] is universal ;)
- The two books I was working on are actually available in my library. So, I was comfortable in cataloguing them. It was a bit slow because I "needed" to refer to the pictures in the folder. I am happy to do it again.

Q.2 What was it like seeing MARC fields in the .rtf document?

- Slightly strange at first but quickly got used to it.
- This was fine. Very like MarcEdit and easy to pick up the right formatting and spacing.
- I don't use MARC at all so it was mainly confusing; but the .rtf format wasn't the reason!
- Like being at home.
- Seeing [MARC] in the .rtf document did not pose a problem.
- I don't have experience with .rtf documents but it makes sense to me.

Q.3 You have contributed your skills to the catalogue of another organisation. How does that feel?

- Co-operative.
- It's similar to doing original cataloguing for my organisation and sharing the record – contributing something that will be useful to other organisations.
- Brilliant!
- Again, ultimately fine – but I did have a tiny tiny bit of ethical unease. [Presumably for copying and pasting, author's note] That said, it was curiously satisfying.
- Very good – it's nice to contribute to make data available when there isn't any!
- It was really exciting, and I wish that we would have had more time to do this at the conference. But continuing doing similar work at my ordinary work place would be a privilege.

Q.4 How has the experience made you reflect on any day-job cataloguing you do?

- Just that I wish that I [was] doing this kind of cataloguing as a part of my daily cataloguing routine.
- It hasn't.
- I feel lucky that we have Alma here [at own institution] so that we can download records from WorldCat or other libraries.
- I don't catalogue in my role; but I did reflect on how this could be made a public event to catalogue material that isn't catalogued.
- I should remember more.
- My day-job is largely managing cataloguing and I rarely actually catalogue individual items anymore. I have to look things up much more than I used to.

Q.5 The data we're contributing to Drawing Room's catalogue is unlicensed so it can be shared freely via any future aggregators (like the National Bibliographic Knowledgebase or via Z39.50). What are your thoughts on this?

- That is the way it should/ought to be.
- I would like to explore this.
- Bloody good!!
- That's the way it should be.
- This is great – I'm very happy for metadata I create to be shared freely (at least for non-profit purposes).
- Great idea – more shared data the better!

Q.6 Do feel free to elaborate on any other thoughts you've had about this exercise.

- Strangely enjoyable (maybe the format made it a bit novel...)
- I think I was the only person in the room who didn't use MARC (which I expected going in), so no doubt that had a detrimental impact on the others on my table! Despite this, I did enjoy taking part and I did learn about MARC a little too!
- The notes on cataloguing exhibition catalogues/art materials were useful because I rarely deal with materials like this. Art materials are an area where I'm aware there's specialist cataloguing knowledge that I don't have... I'd hope that over a longer session I'd get more confident with these materials.
- Prior cataloguing experience in MARC and RDA is really helpful.
- The other cataloguer I was paired up with was very experienced and we went right at and dove into it. Normally I very rarely catalogue together with someone else. Sure, we confer amongst each other on a weekly basis with questions on different details, but to catalogue like this was different. I also enjoyed contributing with a very tiny part in helping the collection becoming more visible and universal. More, more, more...

The source of bibliographic metadata

It should come as no surprise to us that metadata librarians carry with them the tacit knowledge underpinning resource description and discovery. What might this mean when many of us feel far away from where the tools and standards we use are designed?

Bibframe promises a model within which we can share much more easily. We have long had an infrastructure that allows us to share our metadata, however. We have used Z39.50 effectively but our institutional outsourcing has created a marketplace

that needs us all to buy the same metadata to cover costs of creating it. New technology is a tool not a solution.

As a profession we have a long history of collaborating beyond employer borders for the benefit of the sector. We do this at infrastructure, strategy and policy levels. If we recognise that metadata expertise resides in us first, rather than in existing and future technology, could we consider collaborating on a more practical level too? Could we consider ourselves to be the metadata "source" of choice?

I am lucky to sit on the Library Hub Community Advisory Board (LHCAB) where we discuss the UK's repository of shared bibliographic metadata. I'm involved in a Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) and Research Libraries UK (RLUK) initiative exploring open licencing for metadata. I've volunteered too for the UK subject heading work being led by CILIP's MDG. These are all national initiatives that reflect the combined contribution of many years of colleagues' working lives. This work shows that when we collaborate we shape our sector.

In theory, our acquisition overlap should mean that many new resources could be catalogued once by one of us and the record shared. We have the infrastructure to do this, from scratch, now. A shared cataloguing programme would both develop our experience of sharing and ensure that we have cataloguers left to catalogue in Bibframe when the time comes.

What is stopping us? Is it too much to expect libraries to share acquisition information? Is it too old-fashioned, too "MARC"? Is working out how much metadata we all currently buy in and how much of it we actually need, just too time consuming? All of these barriers are real but none seem insurmountable and none offer justification for not changing how we work. And for now, there are some of us around the country who could do more together than simultaneously oversee the import of the same metadata into each of our library catalogues.

We could team up across sectors and together catalogue the majority of our new material. Perhaps more excitingly, however, we can collaborate on projects, on the materials we know that could and should be more discoverable. We can team up to create super records for all sorts of subjects and resources. I still know little about cataloguing art resources. But thanks to all the good work already out there, I was able to bring together data that makes previously difficult-to-find resources much more discoverable with very little software.

With even less software and infrastructure, conference delegates turned up for an hour and did the same.

What else can we do?

Cataloguing Now books catalogued

The Drawing Room Library catalogue is available at <https://drawingroom.org.uk/library-research/library-catalogue/>

- **George Condo: ink drawings** / Skarstedt.
- **Lorna Simpson: ink** / [edited by Eve MacSweeney].
- **PissIng ink: 80 pages from the Miriam Books** / by Mathew Hale.
- **Shelf life : Neil Gall** / by Simon Groom, Johanna Malt and Charles Darwent.
- **David Hockney: travels with pen, pencil and ink** / introduction by Edmund Pillsbury.
- **The animal side** / Jean-Christophe Bailly, translated by Catherine Porter.
- **Beyond the line: the art of Diana Cooper** / edited by Margo A. Crutchfield with an interview by Barbara Pollack.
- **The ungentlemanly art : a history of American political cartoons** / Stephen Hess and Milton Kaplan.
- **The art of walking: a field guide** / edited by David Evans.
- **Italian drawing of the 20th century** / edited by Irina Zucca Alessandrelli with Antonello Negri.
- **The stage of drawing: gesture and act ; selected from the Tate collection** / selected by Avis Newman ; curated by Catherine de Zegher ; organized by the Drawing Center, Tate.
- **Based on paper: the Marzona collection : revolution in art, 1960-1975 = die Sammlung Marzona : Revolution der Kunst** / Michael Lailach, Andreas Schalhorn.
- **Contemporary art at Deutsche Bank London** / [editor and essays: Friedhelm Hütte ; translation, David Britt].
- **560 Broadway: a New York drawing collection at work, 1991-2006** / edited by Amy Eshoo.
- **The world on paper: Deutsche Bank collection** / [with texts by Elsy Lahner, Friedhelm Hütte, Katherine Stout and Lothar Muller, and translations by Burke Barrett.]
- **Pencil in hand: 20th century drawings** / Colecciones Fundación Mapfre.
- **The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection: catalogue raisonné** / [edited by Libby Hruska].
- **Dessins surréalistes: visions et techniques** / [edited by Béatrice Salmon, Viviane Tarenne and Rudolf Velhagen].
- **Donation Florence et Daniel Guerlain: dessins contemporains** / sous la direction de Jonas Storsve.

- **Oeuvres sur papier: acquisitions 1996-2001 : collections du Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Cabinet d'Art graphique /** [catalogue coordinated by Claude Schweisguth].
- **Die Sammlung Ploner: Albertina, Belvedere, Neue Galerie Graz /** edited by Agnes Husslein-Arco, Peter Pakesch and Klaus Albrecht Schröder.