

WOMEN ARTISTS of  the AMERICAN WEST

## NATURE, CULTURE, PUBLIC SPACE



fig. 23: *Untitled* (SF Public Library)  
5000 sq. ft.; card catalog cards and plaster  
SF Percent for Public Art Program:  
SF Art Comm. 1990-95,  
© Ann Chamberlain and Ann Hamilton

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Artist Statement  
Ann Chamberlain

*Untitled* (San Francisco Public Library) (1990-95):  
San Francisco Percent for Public Art Program: San Francisco Art  
Commission, 5000 sq. ft., card catalog cards and plaster.

Fifty thousand library cards surface the wall which divides the closed stacks  
and circulating collection of the San Francisco Public Library. Each of the  
library cards has a hand-written citation on it from the book it represents, or  
else from another book which relates to it by subject. The cards are covered  
by a thin veneer of artisans plaster. Nearly two-hundred scribes wrote on the  
cards in a dozen different languages.

The overlay of written citations on the informational text of each card  
represents the interface of a community with a collection, and distinguishes  
the arbitrary accumulation of information from the process of selection,  
which is associated with understanding and knowledge.

<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/WAAW/Cohn/Artists/Chamberlainstat.html> (1 of 3) 11/22/2006 10:21:39 AM

## How have others chosen to to preserve of the card catalog?

The inspiration for cARTalog  
grew out community project at  
the San Francisco Public Library.

David Bunn

Known for his installation art, David Bunn has  
earned much attention since 1990 when he  
took possession of the no-longer-used two  
million reference cards in the Los Angeles  
Central Library system. From these cards, he  
has made numerous installments empathetic of  
their obsolescence, orderly symbolism, subject  
matter, and formality.

Artist David Bunn has achieved both  
preservation of the idea and artifact.



## Relics of the Material Age

In 1990, David Bunn took possession of the  
two million cards in the Los Angeles Central  
Library's catalogue somewhat in the manner of  
an eccentric heir claiming the unwanted por-  
tion of an estate. To administrators at the  
library, the card catalogue was not so much an  
inheritance as the deceased itself. Its contents  
had been made available on-line several years  
earlier, and it sat, an unwieldy, inconvenient  
corpse, awaiting suitable disposal. Why fill a  
storeroom with information that can now be

saved on a chip the size of a postage stamp?  
Bunn has paid loving attention to the cata-  
logue ever since, embracing it on the very terms  
by which it had been rejected by others—its  
physicality, age and obsolescence. He spins  
poems from the titles running across the tops of  
the cards, extracting a life and quirky spirit  
from these unlikely remains. He honors the cata-  
logue's systematic order and succinct  
formality, while crediting it also with personal-  
ity, history, ideology, even an unconscious. Bunn

is, in a sense, acting the ghostwriter, helping the  
card catalogue write its autobiography. Far from  
outlasting its usefulness, the catalogue, which  
now rests in boxes along a wall of gently bowed  
shelves in the artist's East L.A. studio, has  
proven inexhaustible, an archive suffused with  
possibility.

The first installment in Bunn's ongoing work  
is plastered on the walls of the very library  
from which the cards were ejected. A *Place for*

As libraries replace their card catalogues with on-line databases, the cards  
themselves—obsolete, bulky, worn—are usually discarded. Artist David Bunn rescued  
two million such cards and, in his elegant installations, directs our attention to the strong  
poetic voice still coursing through them.

BY LEAH OLLMAN

*Everything and Everything in Its Place*, the  
artist's only public-art commission to date, was  
completed in 1993 as part of the renovation and  
expansion of the Central Library, which had  
recently been damaged in two arson fires. Bunn  
installed nearly 10,000 cards from the deactivat-  
ed catalogue in the two elevators of the  
building's new wing. Cards pertaining to the  
subject areas of each floor of the library can be  
seen on the shafts through glass panels in the  
passenger cars. Bunn covered the back and side

walls of the cars themselves with all the cata-  
logue's cards for titles beginning with the words  
"the complete" and "the comprehensive"—*The  
Complete Accounting Course, The Complete  
Book of Self-Defense, The Complete Greek  
Tragedies, The Complete Guide to Ethnic New  
York* and so on. Wrapping around passengers like a familiar  
old quilt in ivory and mauve, the patchwork of  
cards is nostalgically comforting, but also  
subtly subversive in its evocation of the power

and also the presumptuousness of the  
library's mission to be either complete or com-  
prehensive. Bunn's installation was echoed a  
few years later by another, similar work by  
*Opposite: David Bunn's multi-title grouping "Chain  
Saw" from the "Double Master" project, 2006.  
Opposite poems, Los Angeles Central Library  
catalogue cards, card replica drawing, 20 by 30 inches  
overall. Above: detail showing catalogue card drawn  
by Bunn's then-assistant Madeline Leibel, acrylic, pencil,  
pen and ink on paper, 14½ by 19½ inches framed.*