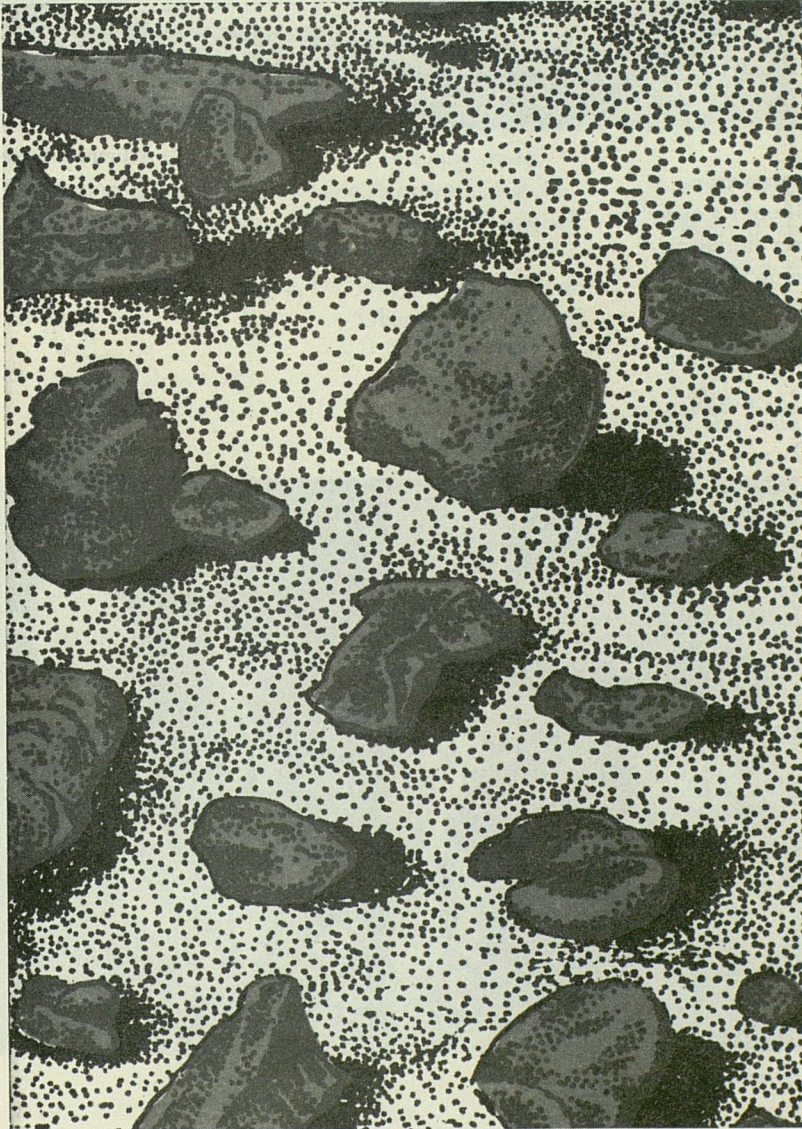


## Surprises: An Anthological Introduction to Some Women Artists' Books

The "artist's book": a book by an artist, not about art, but *as* art in itself. Developed from the traditional *editions de luxe* and from illustrated collaborations between poets and artists in the late 1950's, gathered steam in the mid-to-late 1960's with the advent of Conceptual Art (in which ideas became paramount over objects), only in the late 1970's has attracted broad attention. Most artists' books are either self-published or published by cooperative or small presses; sometimes printed by galleries or museums to replace exhibition catalogues. The most attractive aspects of the artist's book have been: its cheapness to make and to sell; its potential independence from institutions; its potential accessibility to an audience more varied in taste, class, economic background than that of the art world; and its potential to make the private (which is art) more broadly public.



Frances Butler

*I am a flower of seeds and sleep/ I am a series of messages that appear unrelated. I am a voyage of continuity but am not continuous/ I am a bearer of meanings that draw from the spring.*

—Michelle Stuart, *The Fall*  
(New York, 1977)

*We can no longer see ourselves as if we live in a dream or as an imitation of something that just does not reflect the reality of our lives.*

—Suzanne Santoro, *Towards a New Expression* (Rome, 1973)

There is no way to reproduce here enough words and images to do justice to the variety, ingenuity, soaring hopes and fears, and sly imaginations of these artists. Instead, this is a dip into a pile of sometimes transparent pages—thousands of them—a gentle mountain

of

leaves

drawers

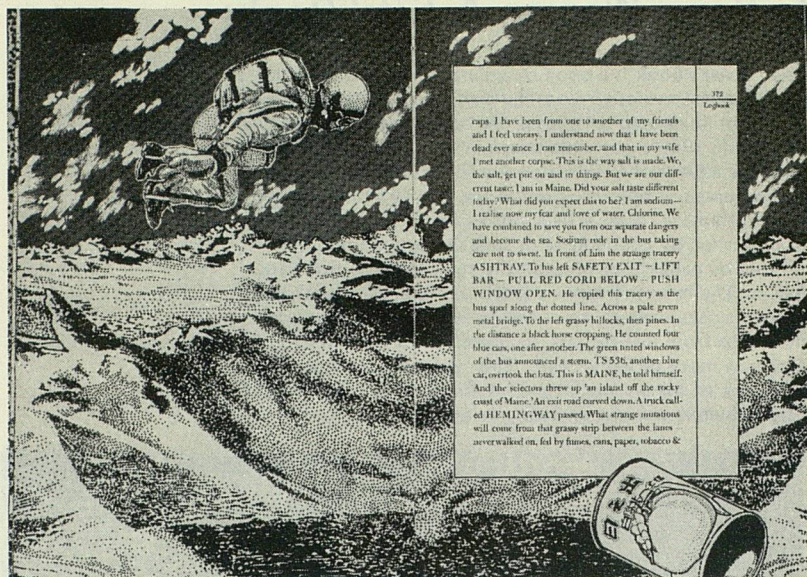
nests

warrens

burrows

layers

secrets



Frances Butler

tentative and aggressive communiqués from within. The book, after all, is an object with a life of its own, essentially a collection of fragments, never simultaneously perceived. Having looked at some 200 women artists' books and noted about 100 others I wasn't able to see, I am more tantalized than conclusive, which is as it should be. In fact, the most salient characteristic of the women's books I've seen, regardless of style and intention, is their

inconclusive infinity of

associations

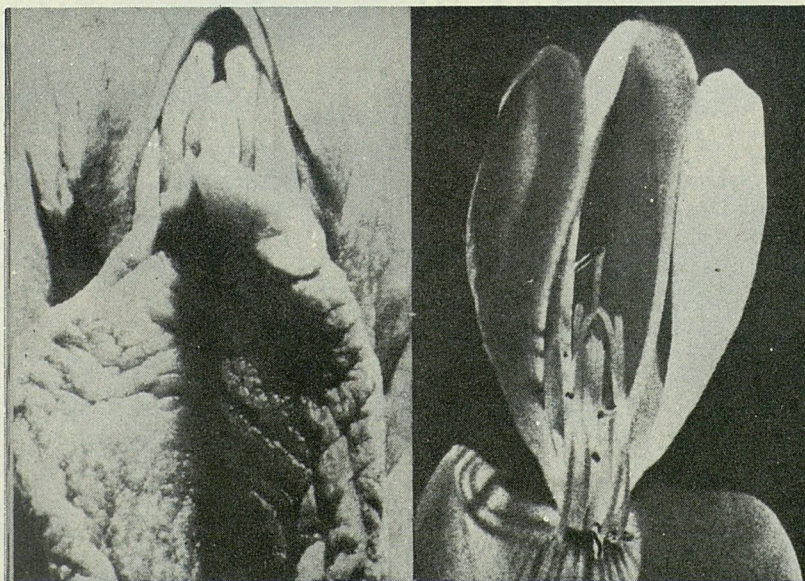
connections

syntheses

branches

openings

re-presentations.



Suzanne Santoro

Lists turn up a lot in these books, their sources in

fantasies

musings

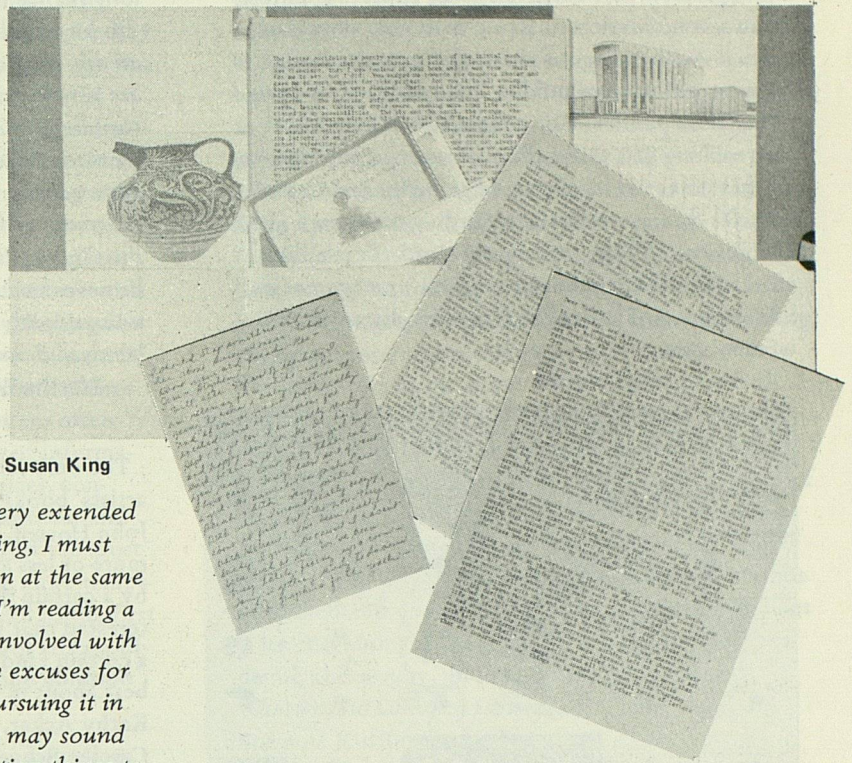
self

daily routines

books read

people known

sights seen.



Susan King

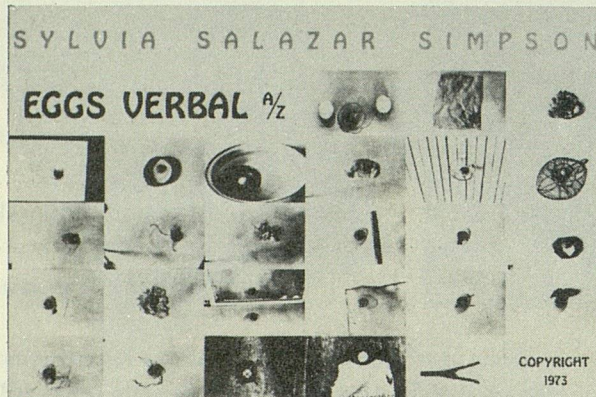
*... it seems that I cannot work for a very extended period of time on one and the same thing, I must change in between, or do something fun at the same time, like eating pumpkin seeds while I'm reading a tough book. Perhaps this is why I get involved with so many different things. I like to have excuses for not concentrating on something and pursuing it in depth. . . . On the other hand, and this may sound like a contradiction—I am unable to ration things to myself. . . . Once I get into things, I become engrossed and gobble them up in large dosages.*

—Athena Tacha, *The Way My Mind Works*  
(Oberlin, Ohio, 1973)

Many of these books, or my favorites among them, provoke a new way of reading—a “skimming” that exists someplace between reading and looking. It is related to the method of a researcher, who falls into pockets of meaning by riding over swells of no-meaning: To examine a long book in 10 minutes, you set your mind like an alarm clock to go on when it encounters a specific fact or a clue to it; then you turn your mind off and go along, page by page, rapidly, taking care never to “concentrate” because the vessel must remain empty until the sought item fills it. Such methods yield no obvious answers to the questions “What does it mean?” “Where does it say so?” They result in books that can be read, or absorbed, on some “other” and “illogical” level where things, people, events are not so much described as formed in the interstices of the reader’s mind, where her own experience and associations meet the writer’s.

The book as a field onto which the viewer projects her own meanings is a potentially effective medium for a new kind of communication. It offers a sensibility particularly suited to a visual approach and a collage esthetic, a fragmentation focusing on relationships between parts rather than on their stylistic peculiarities. Much more than male bookmakers,

women artists understand this and avoid pontification and aggressive pointlessness. Their sources are more often a combination of found materials—visual or textual—with collage as the transformative bridge between private and public. The collage is an open form, an expansive—not a reductive—mode of approaching life, self, others. It reaches out, devours all that comes in its path, and reforms, restructures, recycles this raw material according to its own needs and desires. Collage is the great synthetic medium, ideal for the expression of overlays, transparencies, lists, layers, and other elements ubiquitous in women's art.



Sylvia Salazar Simpson

"It is very provoking," Humpty Dumpty said after a long silence, looking away from Alice as he spoke, "to be called an egg—very." "I said you looked like an egg, Sir," Alice gently explained, "And some eggs are very pretty, you know," she added, hoping to turn her remarks into a sort of compliment. "Being a woman, it is natural that you would judge only by appearances, though it is well known women have no judgment either." Alice didn't know what to say to this: it wasn't at all like conversation, she thought, as he never said anything to her; in fact, his last remark was evidently addressed to a tree—so she folded her hands and remained silent.

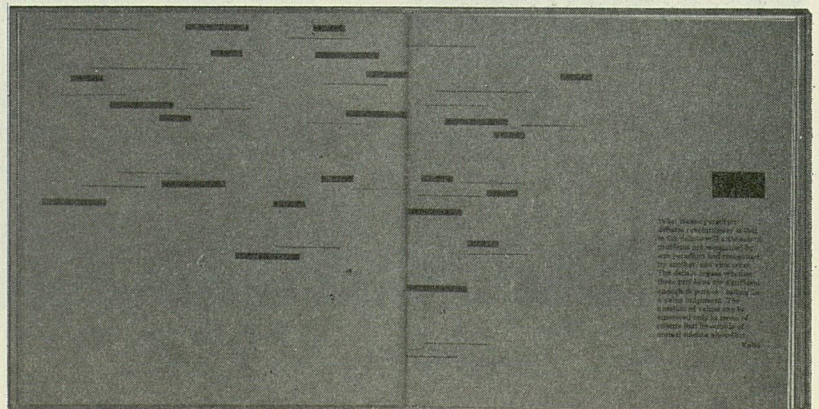
—Martha Wilson, *Queen*, from *The Annotated Alice* (New York, 1976)

The only critical essay I've seen about women artists' books is by a man ("A Syntax of Self," by John Howell, *Art-Rite*, no. 14, 1977). Intelligent and more-or-less sympathetic, it is nevertheless pervaded by a certain disapproval. I quote it because I was interested that what Howell doesn't seem to like about a certain kind of woman's book is just what I like best about it. Discussing works by Connie de Jong, Kathy Acker, Jennifer Bartlett, Poppy Johnson, Carolee Schneemann, Adrian Piper, Marcia Hafif, Laurie Anderson, Vaughn Rachel, Jacki Apple, Brenda Price, Martha Rosler, Athena Tacha, Susan King, Carol Trantor, Michele Kort, and Alison Knowles, he discovered "a sensibility, not a method of shaping. . . . writing conceived as utterance, not system. . . . A shift from metaphor to first person marks a reduction of formal means, not a refinement, as writing identifies with self and follows a short-cut across aesthetic distance to offer intimate discoveries, not virtuosity."

*Will the egg go down in history?  
Will the rabbit learn to talk?*

*Will our own mysteriousness end  
by breaking our own hearts?*

—Pati Hill, *Slave Days* (New York, 1975)

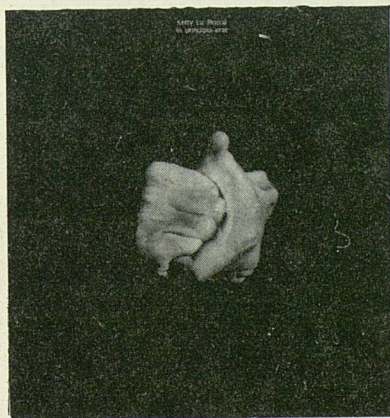


Sharon Hare

Because of the art world's rigid focus on style and on personality as salable objects, woman the synthesizer has been ignored, neglected, even despised by those who prefer thesis and antithesis to keep the war going forever. Many women artists worry that if they are doing several different kinds of work simultaneously they should edit for public consumption, hide all but one direction for fear of presenting a confused and inconsistent image. The artist's book, bypassing the censors and selectors (dealers, critics, editors) and aiming directly for communication with its audience, is helping many break this taboo against variety. Just as women's lives are so often collages in themselves, complete with interruptions and abrupt daily role changes, women artists' books are often "collections," receptacles for fragments of information and experience focusing on differences, contrasts, contradictions within a grid of sameness and rhythmic regularity. The infinite variety of the most ordinary personal experience often seems more tempting than pompous conclusions. At the end of the first of her three (*Pink, Yellow, Blue*) books of stream-of-consciousness performance writing, **Poppy Johnson** says resignedly:

*I'm afraid I've just started writing again and I think the idea of a postscript as suggested to me was supposed to be more like the first page and not at all like the middle pages but to me that means the end which is misleading because I refuse to end. . . .*  
 [She imagines an "affirmative" editorial board for her book—women, Marxists, teachers, craftspeople, neorealists, etc.] *cutting out the unacceptable and repetitious and untrue and adding footnotes and critiques. . . . Very few sentences would be left intact but those that are can be fabricated in any scale deemed appropriate out of Cor-Ten or sandblasted aluminum. Otherwise as you can see, left to my own devices, I would just keep writing and writing and writing and never be able to say here, here is . . .*

(New York, 1976)



Ketty La Rocca

Language tends to be used manipulatively, for its flexibility. Words are split, stretched, molded, and related to images in ways that are more sensuous than literary, even when there are not pictures. A complex book by the late Italian artist **Ketty La Rocca**, called *In Principio Erat* (Florence, 1971) contrasts highly expressive photographs of hands acting out the proverbs and sentence fragments that serve as captions.

**Ellen Lanyon** does it all with pictures in her *Transformations, 1973-74* (New York, 1977)—a delightful little accordion foldout book of pen-and-ink drawings in which images flow from frame to frame, unfolding, changing shape and meaning, so that "reading" it is like going to a magic show. **Marcia Hafif** does it all with *Words* (New York, 1976)—page after page of margin-to-margin "prose" (mostly nouns, few verbs, no sentences) which inundate the reader in a flood of connections that refuses to pause, stop, allow time for the usual sense-making. **Karen Shaw** does it all with humorously coded numbers and letters (various published and unpublished books); **Sharon Hare** does it by combining a classic constructivist look, an academic philosophy, and a feminist transparency (*Quotes and Queries*, Los Angeles, 1976); and **Suzanne Kuffler** does it like this:

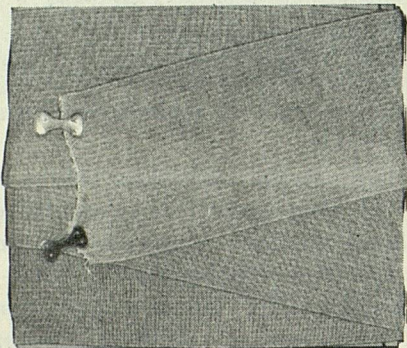
*Water Table: Tableau/ table/leau = French sound for water/ Tableau/ DESCRIPTION (Mona Lisa: Description, Valencia, 1972).*

One of the most effective and bitterest collages of manipulation is a relentless and baldly presented collection of folk sayings about women—*Ma Collection de proverbes* by **Annette Messenger** (Milan, 1976)—which proved to the author "that men fear women as much as they fear death. . . . the two phenomena that must ineluctably be endured":

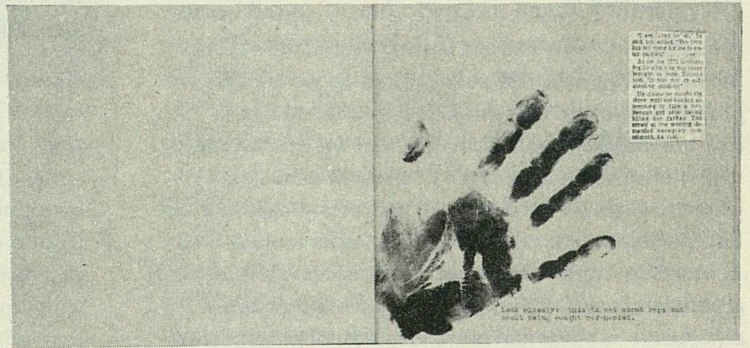
*"The woman most praised is the one of whom no one speaks"; "The eye of a woman is a spider's web"; "Weeds grow where woman utters"; "When woman can't find an answer, that means the ocean has run dry"; "Between the yes and the no of a woman there is not even space for the point of a needle"; "Beat your wife each morning and if you don't know why, she does"; "To hold a woman to her word is like holding an eel by the tail"; "May the reaper of death mow down all women, except my mother."*

The fragment in its gentlest incarnation is a wisp, a connective tissue, delicate but tough; in its harshest, it is violence itself, parts torn from a whole which threatens their fragility. For example, two wonderful women's books—both handmade, in small editions. I got *Marilyn Monroe* by Annie Hickman in the mail in 1971 and haven't heard from the artist since. Her book is pale pink, about 4 by 7 inches, sewn at the spine with two tiny three-dimensional red plastic high-heeled shoes above a white pasted cloud bearing the title. Inside are reproduction montages featuring Monroe with added sequins, an American flag sticker, a four-leaf clover, and a fondly fantastic text printed in a childlike hand:

*When Marilyn was a fetus I kept her in formaldehyde and sometimes I took her out, put on her rubber pants, tied her to the top of my hat and we went out for some sun. . . . Once when Marilyn was 75 I made a rocking chair for her and then I froze her in a block of ice and I keep her in the basement. On her birthday I thawed her out we went for a walk she burped and then she went home because she was 3.*



Suzanne Lacy



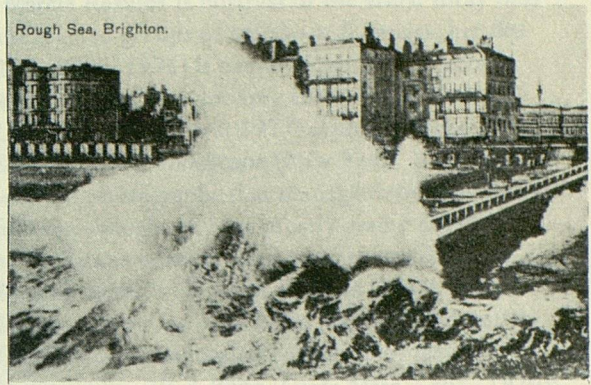
Suzanne Lacy's *Falling Apart* (Los Angeles, 1976) is even hand-typed, as well as hand-glued, painted, and sewn. Wrapped in a flesh-colored expandable Ace bandage, it combines Lacy's view of her own body as a gift (relating to another piece in which she legally donated all her organs) with childhood wounds, the accidental death of a neighborhood boy, hands, touch, waiting, pain, and a profound sympathy for women's woes: "Often this will be seen as a book of blood. but no. this is a book about language. Where does the violence come from?"

Violence is a major theme in feminist books, which tend to be either very angry or very tender, or both. **Stephanie Oursler's** *Un Album da Violenza*, published in Rome in 1976 by the feminist collective Edizioni delle donne, uses newspaper clippings, photos, portraits, and text to detail violence done to women. **Jacki Apple's** *Partition* (New York, 1976) is about interpersonal brutality. Printed on a transparent vellum with one or two paragraphs per page, it begins:

*A plate glass window exists between us. . . . We hurl pebbles at each other. Words bounce backwards off the polished surface. . . . I watch for cracks to form. Lines in the forehead, around the mouth. A single word might drive a spike in. . . . My isolation becomes magnified, swollen out of proportion. . . . It is intolerable, the cold smooth surface that separates us. You hurl yourself through the window with all the force of your body and will, fragments flying, slicing the space with ribbons of blood. Now between us is the opacity of white bandages and guilt.*

Lacy's *RAPE IS* (Los Angeles, 1972) says where violence comes from. Professionally, even slickly printed, it makes an initial metaphorical point with a circular red seal that must be broken to enter the white cover to the red lining. From then on the points are made bluntly, with a single terse sentence on each double spread: "RAPE IS when you attempt to prosecute the rapist and find yourself on trial instead. RAPE IS when you are hitchhiking and he therefore imagines you are asking for it. RAPE IS when you're thankful to have escaped with your life."

Books should spread the word. Among other things, they are traditionally vehicles of propaganda. Women's "political" books are rarely theoretical; the didactic is discarded in favor of a more intimate response. The use of the first person, attacked and condemned by the patriarchy as "confessional," is often a skillfully ambiguous strategy by which to involve the viewer. **Martha Rosler's** *trilogy on colonization* (New York, 1977), for instance, incorporates three pieces originally dispersed as postcards. All have to do with food and all are written in the first person, which makes their underlying social messages more "palatable." In "McTowers maid," an employee of a hamburger chain beefs up the burgers with grass, radicalizing producers and consumers in the process; in "a budding gourmet," bourgeois "International cuisine" provides subtle parallels to imperialism; in "Tiajuana maid," a Mexican woman simply states her experience in middle-class families, where she is taught, among other things, the recipe for a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. Rosler sees her



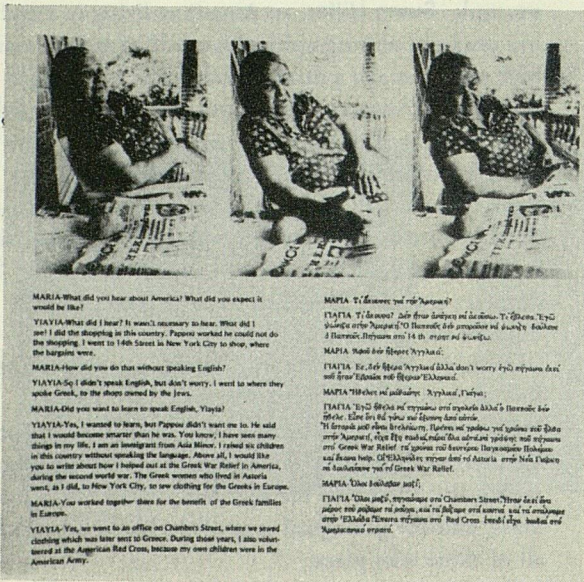
Susan Hiller

books and her similarly consumption-oriented videotapes as "decoys" that "mimic some well-known cultural form" so as to "strip it of its mask of innocence."

Sometimes intimacy is disguised as objectivity. For example, **Susan Hiller**, an American living in London, has used old photographic postcards of storms and high surf to make a double point. The book itself—*Rough Sea* (Sussex, 1976)—just illustrates the cards. It is "dedicated to the unknown artists"—the title of the exhibition it accompanies and of still another book, in which these popular artworks are schematized and used as the basis of a linguistic treatise that is the opposite of the unknown artists' intention. Yet both are art, and the effect of their juxtaposition doubles the pleasure of each.

Similarly, **Michelle Stuart** makes her point in *The Fall* with old stereopticon photos of Southern California waterfalls juxtaposed against a fragmented handwritten narrative that combines myth, autobiography, the history of the area and its native inhabitants, and the geological saga of the rocks on which all of these take place.

*Cuyamaca 1847 The coyote sang of cycles. She collected every grain of sand on the rancheria placing them in baskets she would pass her life counting. Carefully sorting time and space. She put time and space in different baskets. Depending on how the light of the sun or moon touched the woven circles. Those whose eyes were dilated by desire had taken her land. Vines and roses, acorns and trees yielding incense. Pink abalone cups and the bud of her womb. Now they removed her from history. She was charged with turning destiny into significance. Daily unbounded repetition remained.*



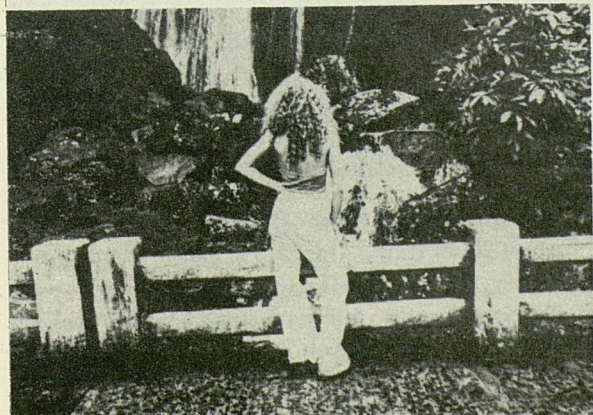
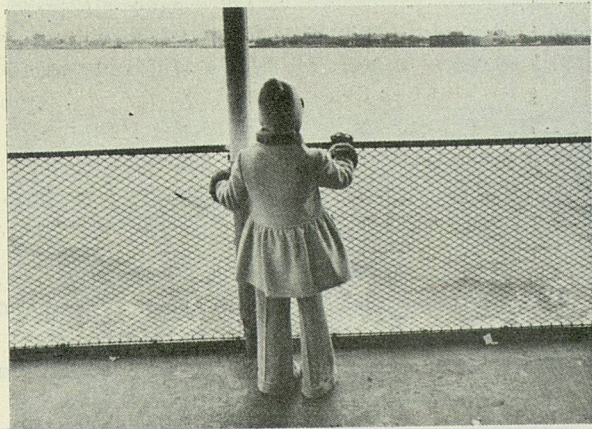
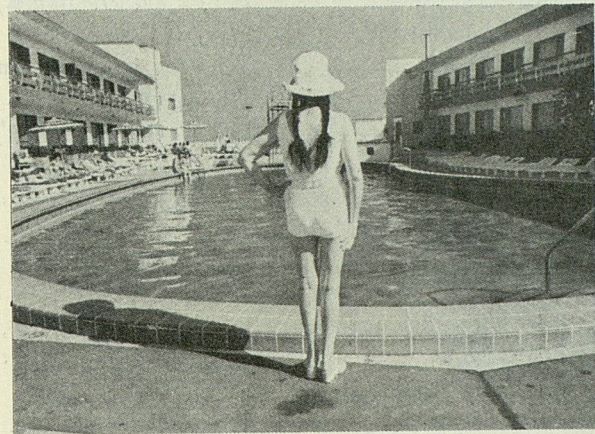
Maria Karras

A good many women's books deal collaboratively with friendship and family, as in **Maria Karras'** dialogues in *The Greek in Us: My Grandmother and I* (Los Angeles, 1976) or **Mary Jean Kenton's** *Ann Chapman Scales Postcards* (New York, 1977)—glimpses of Scales' far-from-dull life and Kenton's art, which consists here of adding quotations to expand the meaning of the personal. **Michele Kort's** *Some of My Friends* (Los Angeles, 1975) is a series of portraits/anecdotes about people with whom she has "struggled with friendship." **Gail Rubini's** *real blue skies* (Chicago, 1976) is a 2-1/2-inch-square color Xerox flip book—quick, direct, breezy, like a visit from a friend, which is the subject. **Simone Whitman** and **Susan Weil**, dancer and painter, respectively, are friends, so they published their journals back-to-back in *Two Notebooks* (New York, 1977). **Susan King's** elaborate *Portfolio of Letters* (Los Angeles, 1975) presents exquisite facsimiles of familiar materials nestled in a shiny folio and tied with a pink satin ribbon. Correspondence artist **Irene Dogmatic's** *Star Spanieled Boners* and *Rover's Romances* (San Francisco, 1975, 1976) record responses in the spirit of her canine theme.

A lot of these books are very funny. Some have no *raison d'être* but a good-humored cleverness, which is refreshing when it comes on as small a scale as an artist's book. **Jennie Snider's** *Pencil Picture Dictionary* (New York, 1973) is a whimsical parody of the art world's linguistic pretensions; it goes through the alphabet in coloring-book style and leaves it laughing! **Jan Harrison Denson's** *Word Book A* and *Word Book B* (unique, "unpublished" books from Palo Alto) were similarly motivated. The artist was told she thought in circles and wasn't logical, so she read the encyclopedia from A to Z and made these books about "How do we know what we don't know?" **Heidi Fasnacht's** untitled black notebook (New York, 1976) explores the formal "nature of the book" deadpan, labeling the "following page," "preceding page," and so on. **Sherrie Levine** makes a house of one of her books and inhabits it. Simpleminded and strangely evocative, it is a binder with sheets in each side pocket: On the left are MOTHER, FATHER, SISTER, and BROTHER; on the right, LIVING ROOM, DINING ROOM, BEDROOM, BATHROOM, KITCHEN, and DEN.\*

\*I guess this is the place to mention the more interesting women's examples of several syndromes common to all artists' books: comics (Julie Poltanski's *Which Witch Ate the Sandwich or Who Done It*), cinematic flip books (Isabel Dowler Gow's *Flat Balloon Flip Book*—(Montreal, 1975), rubber stamp collages (Leavenworth Jackson's *Make Art and Perseverance*—San Francisco, 1976) and the all-too-often indiscriminately collected "found junk" collages from newspapers, ads, magazines (Pat Tavenner's erotic *Paper Paintings*—Oakland, 1972—and Merrily Ford's *Lost and Found Childhood*—Glendora, Calif., 1970—being among the few that project any clarity).





Marcia Resnick

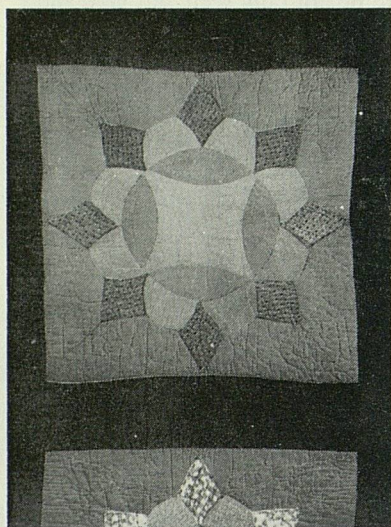
**Marcia Resnick** is mistress of the visual foray into unexpected groups of off-the-wall images; her *See* (New York, 1976) is centered pictures of people, seen from the rear, looking at views; *Landscape/Loftscape* (New York, 1977) reproduces the outdoors indoors; *Landscape* (New York, 1975) is a series of photographs that manage to be quite beautiful even though they are mostly grainy sky defined by landscape contours and two are upside down. **Barbara Smith's** *Go Look at Cows* (Los Angeles, 1969) (a five-page exercise in just that); her much fancier and multi-leveled collection of men and motorcycles called *Rope* (Costa Mesa, Calif., 1970); **Sylvia Salazar Simpson's** *Hairdo* (Los Angeles, 1973) (elegant hairdresses constructed of pineapple, squid, cabbages ....); **Rachel Youdelman's** zany attack on a fancy restaurant's pretentiousness *Fresh Sea Bass From the Blue Pacific* (1976) all are recent West Coast products that are absurd and touching surprises, and have to be not only seen, but held and chuckled over to be believed.



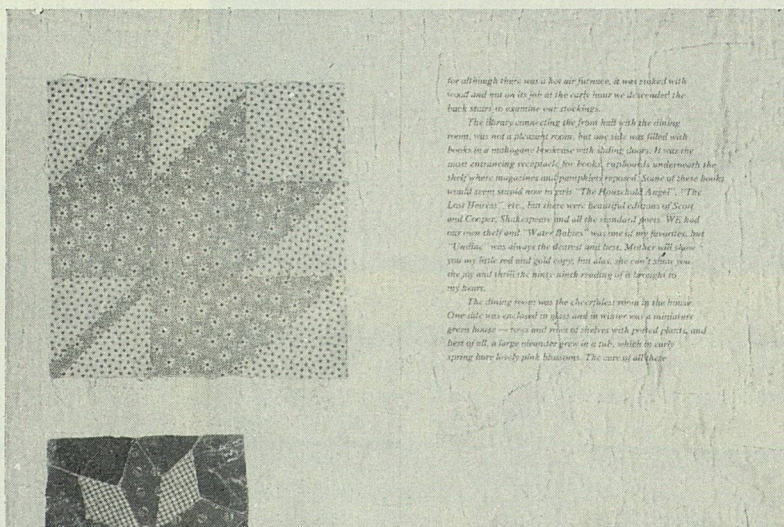
Rachel Youdelman

“Three Cheers for Creative Printing” is the rubber-stamped message over two 1950’s cheerleaders on a Youdelman postcard. Hear, hear. Many of the most impressive artists’ books are entirely visual. An immense amount of futile description is needed to give even an impression of their impressiveness. So I will resort to a list myself. Some of my favorite visual books/sculptures/movies are:

Everything I’ve seen by the virtuoso **Joan Lyons**, who runs the printing workshop at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, N.Y. *Abby Rogers to Her Granddaughter* (1976), an old woman’s childhood memories, is printed on “quilted” pages and illustrated by beautiful colored quilt fragments and pressed flowers. *Bride Book Red and Green* (n.d.) consists of a formal bridal portrait run through an eerie series of tone-color gradations and reversed from red on green to green on red (or green-gray on pink). Its utter simplicity is a triumph of “creative printing.”



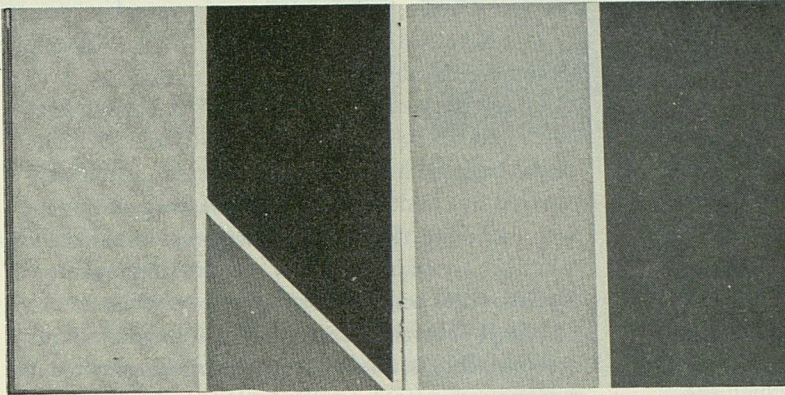
Joan Lyons



**Cynthia Marsh's** *The Material World, The Sporting Life, Urban Displays, Heaven on Earth* (Los Angeles, 1971-1974)—also elegant transformations of the found surfaces of banal images into vivid compositions through sophisticated use of current technology. Oversize sheets of colored or black-and-white, variously textured advertising images vignettted on sleek white grounds comment on the joys of printing and the consumer life, like an esthetically satisfying mail-order catalogue.

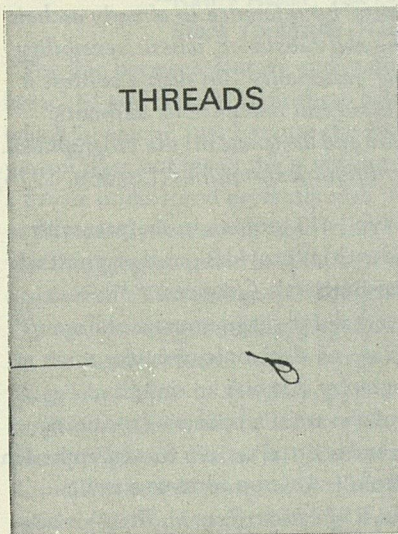
**Martha Haslanger's *Memory Book***

(New York, 1977), which exemplifies the book as abstract art in which medium and meaning merge and sensuously reflect on each other. Clear plastic, soft black vinyl (like carbon paper), satiny mylar, translucent paper, brief mysteriously typed text fragments which fade, are mirrored and reappear, like memory, provide a highly successful exploration of the layered nature of the book: "There is an edge which marks where illusions leak out so that another way of looking will . . ."



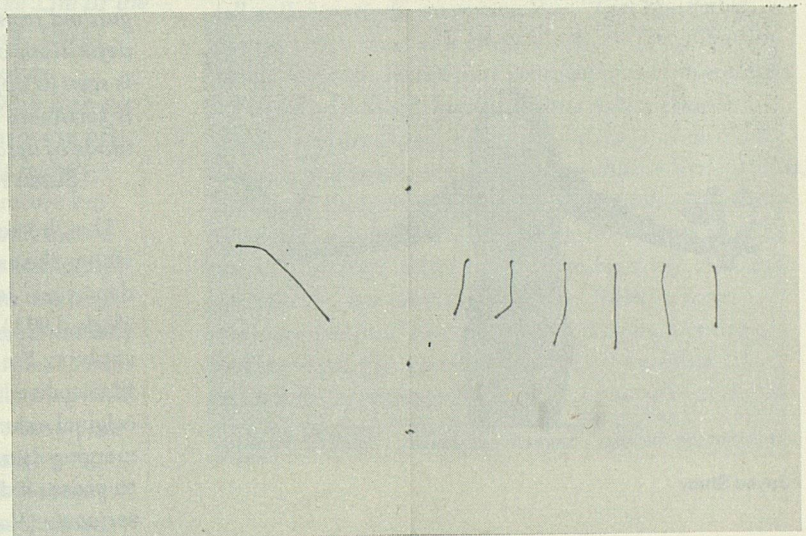
**Laura Blacklow**

**Laura Blacklow's** untitled 4-by-4-inch, 32-page book (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), a brief exhibition made on the scale particularly suitable to the bookwork. Wordless, it is a series of geometric designs in roughly printed, near-monochrome color—pinks, blues, purples. Like the best of this genre, it is simply what it is, without pretension, as is



**Helen Douglas**

**Helen Douglas' *Threads*** (London, n.d.), another small and effective work consisting of drawn lines simulating black thread sewn higgledy-piggledy into the pages (and tied off into patterns); it is bound with real black thread.



If books are piles of layers and levels of sensation and experience, they are also traditionally about time. Their evocation of other timespans while they are read in real time has fascinated visual artists as much as it has writers. Here again, "found" materials play an important role, especially when interwoven with more and less biographical data. **Jane Greengold's** *Passages of Time* (New York, 1977) is dedicated to "my mother and my daughters, between whom I have discovered the passage of time"; it combines daily events and frank details of body functions with quotations from Heisenberg, Eliot, Thoreau, et al.: "Pregnancy was suspended animation—a time between times. . . . The seasons and all their changes are within me." **Mary Fish** measured time by a daily ritual with stones on a California beach in the rhythms of her menstrual cycle, adding historical and mythical information in her book *28 Days* (Chesterfield, Mo., 1976): "begin at the new moon take a bowl and a pile of pebbles each night place a pebble in the bowl until the moon is new again." **Athena Tacha** has bowed to her obsession with personal time and its visual traces in several books—in *Heredity I* and *Heredity II* (Oberlin, 1970-1971), in which she photographically examines the physical traits her husband, his brother, and then she herself have inherited from their parents; and then in three of the colored accordion-pleated booklets that slip into little plastic holders like combs or rain bonnets which she published in the early 1970's: *My Mother, My Adolescent Loves, and The Process of Aging*.



THE LADY AND THE BIRD • NARRATIVE FRAGMENTS • JOYCE CUTLER SHAW

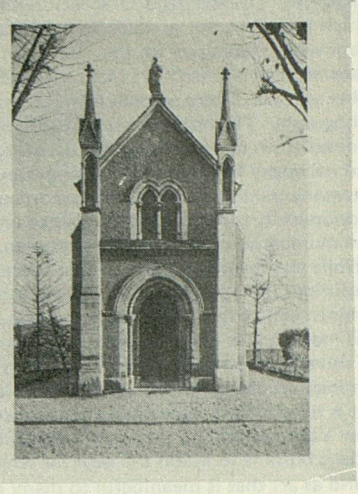
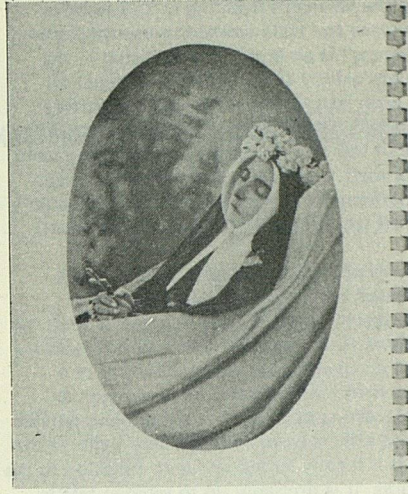
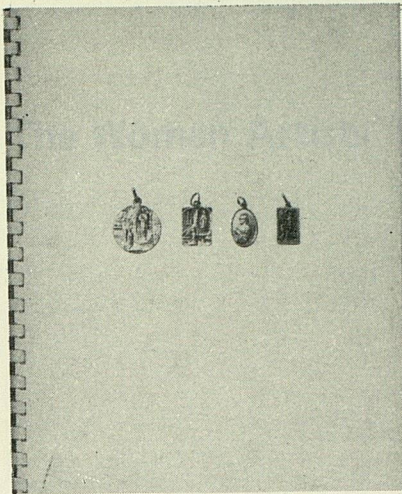
Joyce Shaw

Women's lives, traditionally regarded as devoid of real events, moving from day to day in regular patterns, have found their natural outlets in diaries—a page a day, each day marked, passed, the next temptingly blank but the stack of pages and books adding up to a life. "Dear Diary" has for centuries been the isolated woman's closest and most trusted friend, and contemporary women artists, whose lives are far less predictable, seem to be fascinated by these reminders of regularity. **Hanne Darboven's** 270-page *Diary NYC February 15 Until March 4, 1974* (New York and Turin, 1974) consists of a complex system of numbers based on the calendar, written/drawn out of time in the abstract, and made personal by its obsessive source and execution. **Joyce Shaw's** *The Lady and the Bird* (San Diego, 1976) joins her emotional past and her esthetic present into a rich web sparked by childhood memories of her grandfather, who called her "little bird." **Margaret Raspé** also combines her art with her life by recording in vaguely diaristic form her *films with the 'camerhelmet'* (Berlin, 1974); the transformational fragility of the creative process, made visually compelling by the curious costume apparatus she has invented to make herself the physical center of filming, is echoed in a brittle but lovely cover of black dried seaweed which "will turn green in water."

*Autobiographical reporting on work accomplished may have no more than anecdotal interest. Still, in a context where artists are liable to be labeled either 'makers' or 'thinkers', where 'objects' are distinguished from 'events' by reference to already archaic definitions of time and substance, where 'sensibility' is seen as opposing 'rationality'—in such a contest it is fortunate that there still remains one authentic mode of description and designation: the biographical.*

—Susan Hiller, *Enquiries/Inquiries* (London, 1976)

The "borrowed life" of a woman in the past with whom the artist identifies provides another point of departure. **Jennifer Bartlett's** *Cleopatra I-IV* (New York, 1971) is a verbal and diagrammatic collage applying the language of electronic circuitry to a fictionalized "biography." It was an early and original example of the artist's book as a means of merging narrative and a visual artist's formal approach to prose. **Judith Stein's** *Anyone to tease a saint seriously* (Valencia, 1972; title from G. Stein) is also a collage. The artist's fascination with Saint Bernadette endows photos, movie stills, graphological analysis, and old letters with a new edge and content which connect, for instance, a scientific analysis of the spring at Massabielle, where water burst from the rock when the Virgin appeared to Bernadette, and dry theological texts on various types of ecstasy.



Judith Stein

*I become a murderess.  
I'm born in the late autumn or winter of 1827.  
Troy, New York. . . .  
I don't remember any of my childhood before I was  
6 years old when I started learning to read. My  
eldest sister marries a baronet and lives in England;  
my second eldest sister marries a doctor and moves to  
Scotland. I'm an obedient child: I stubbornly do  
what my parents and their associates want me to do.  
I hallucinate. I climb trees, stick needles up the asses  
of young boys. I hallucinate that the Virgin Mary  
wears black leather pants and a black leather motor-  
cycle jacket, she climbs trees, she doesn't give a fuck  
for anyone.*

—Kathy Acker, *The Childlike Life of the —  
Black Tarantula* (New York, 1975)

The line between fantasy and reality is often breached with impunity in these books. Who is to say which is which? Just because the writer uses the first person does not mean she is writing about herself—a device understood perfectly well in literature but until recently less acceptable in art (and still incompletely comprehended in film, as Yvonne Rainer has discovered). The ambiguous and irreverent use of “found” literature in visual art is considered uneasily by the establishment, which senses that in fact such usage is a thumb to the nose, or worse, showing little respect for the eminent sources that have been plundered. Mightn't this be just plain plagiarism? Actually, the raw material in these books is simply another instrument for making objects, as scissors, glue, and 19th-century illustrations or railroad ties and rusting machinery have provided raw materials for the history of modern art from Cubism and Surrealism to the present. Ignoring the “ethics” of art about art and art influences, and defying iconographical detective work, these women blithely rob and prune the past for their devious contemporary pur-

poses. **Connie de Jong** confronts this sacred bull head-on in her five-volume *The Complete Works of Constance de Jong* (New York, 1975-1976); like Acker, the other major proponent of neo-pornographic plagiarism, she merges borrowed and personal material to create a “new reality” that is ironic, funny, and often confessional with a vengeance:

*I ran into Jorge Luis Borges and asked him if it was Ok to quote him in my book. “Is it Ok, Jorge. I want to use the part about the person who's confined. You know, the modern dreamer. I'm writing a prison novel. I'll just make a few changes from your original words. Add a little here and there. What do you say. Is it Ok?” “It's Ok, darling. Many times I've said 'all collaborations are mysterious.' Just remember, always write what you know about.” “Ok, I'll write about the past. In the past everything is immaculately arranged. All things have the same value: people, books, events, chairs, numbers, me, love, New York are of equal value. Are interchangeable. A little of this, a little of that; everything is coincidental, is interconnected. . . . “No, no, no!” scream the editors, “SEX, REVOLUTION, VIOLENCE. The big stuff. All caps, sweetheart. We can't sell art, your friends, your crummy insights. Listen angel, don't you want to make a name for yourself?” “Yes,” I murmur. “I want a lot of money. But what's a poor girl to do?” “Come upstairs,” they said, “You'll see.”*

**Postscript:** The Women's Graphic Center at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, which functions not as a publisher but as a place to "train women to use the equipment while they carry on their personal projects" is an important first step in the transferral of women's art from the studio and gallery to its natural audience—all other women. There women learn to work with letterpress, silkscreen, and offset lithography. The next step is mass distribution. The feminist art movement has evolved from talking to oneself (knowledge of self and source being an entirely valid and necessary beginning) to talking about oneself to others (communication on an interpersonal basis) and is now becoming increasingly concerned with talking to an economically broader-based audience without losing the intimacy of the personal/communicative mode natural to women.

While the form of artists' books, posters, and postcards is ideally suited to this evolution, their content is too rarely formulated with these ends in mind. Most feminist artists tend to be torn between expressing themselves as strongly as they can and making that expression accessible to others. It is a conflict that will not readily be solved as long as there is an art world and an avant garde. Yet the notion of a feminist art carries within it, by definition, a profound concern for other women.

It is no accident that much of the most interesting bookwork is being done outside New York, where the art world's stranglehold affects women artists very little. If the artist's book is to attain the goal for which it is ideally suited and is to function in the world as art that is meaningful to many people, it is probably up to women artists with an advanced feminist consciousness to provide the impetus, the commitment, and the love that this process will demand.

To order women artists' books, see: the two *Women and the Printing Arts* catalogues (1975, 1977) edited by **Sheila Levrant de Bretteville** and **Helen Alm Roth**, available for \$5.00 from the Woman's Building, 1727 No. Spring St., Los Angeles, CA 90012; and the *Printed Matter* catalogue, available for \$1.50 from the Printed Matter Collective at 7-9 Lispenard St., New York, NY 10013, which runs a bookstore, publisher, and distributor; artists' books can also be bought at La Mamelle, 70 12th St., San Francisco, CA, 94103, and perused at the archive and exhibition space at Frankinfurnace, 112 Franklin St., New York, NY 10013. Special issues on artists' books were recently published by *Art-Rite* (New York) and *The Dumb Ox* (Northridge, Calif.).

Beyond the Backlash: the Politics  
and Vision of Susan B. Anthony  
by Kathy Barry

Mammography: X-Rated Film  
by Susan Rennie

Prose poem by Sara Miles

New fiction by Karen Feinberg  
and Jill Nelson

Crises and Conflicts in Social  
Movement Organizations  
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Original art by Lili Lakich

A play within a play  
by Clare Coss

Surprises: Some Women  
Artists' Books  
by Lucy Lippard

Bibliography of Women Artists'  
Books  
by Judith Hoffberg

Confronting Judgments  
in Academe  
by Judith McDaniel

Adrienne Rich reviews  
*Legal Kidnapping*  
by Anna Demeter

Alice Bloch reviews  
*She Who* by Judy Grahn

Rachel Blau DuPlessis reviews  
*A Literature of Their Own*  
by Elaine Showalter

Fay Stender reviews  
three books on the CPUSA

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# Chrysalis

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