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# artists Books

A CRITICAL SURVEY  
OF THE LITERATURE

STEFAN KLIMA





MARYGROVE COLLEGE

LIBRARY

DETROIT, MICH.

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1998

ARTISTS BOOKS:  
A CRITICAL SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE



*Artists  
books*

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of  
the  
literature*

Stefan Klima

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by Stefan W. Klima

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Adrian & Linda  
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& Ray





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## INTRODUCTION

Charles Alexander, having served as director of Minnesota Center for Book Arts for twenty months, asked the simple question: “What are the book arts?”<sup>1</sup> He could not find a satisfactory answer, though he tried. Somewhere, in a remote corner of the book arts, lay artists books.

These essays are concerned with one conjectural part of the phenomenon of artists books: the body of literature representing a public debate which has endured for almost a quarter of a century.

Three issues dominated the debate: definition; the book considered an object and its challenge to a new kind of reading—the debate’s implicit political act; and, the desire to challenge an art establishment—the debate’s explicit political act. Of the three, the work to establish an acceptable definition consumed the greatest effort. If it is deemed necessary, it has yet to be established.

All cultural phenomena suffer from their frenzy of scrutiny; and least useful is the necessity of establishing genesis. I begin in 1973, simply because it was in that year the term *artists books* first appeared, as the title of an exhibition of books. I examine where and how the debate began, how the principle issues were discussed, and what were failures and

1. Charles Alexander, “Centering the Art (Arts?) of the Book.” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 17 (May 1995): 21.

successes. Concentration is on writings published in Western Europe and the United States.

The *Artists Books* exhibition, and two accompanying reviews, mark a beginning. It is for this reason I adopt the spelling *artists books*, without the apostrophe, unless quoting other sources.

A two-year hiatus followed the exhibition *Artists Books*, after which the debate re-emerged, on the pages of exhibition catalogues, reviews of exhibitions, books and conferences, interviews, and critical essays. Over 300 exhibitions and 700 published works are recorded.<sup>2</sup> There were three peak periods: for exhibitions, 1980–1981, 1987–88, and 1991–1993; for articles and essays, 1977–1978, 1980–1981, and 1991–1993.

The quantitative picture, however, clouds the qualitative perspective. For example, the international art exhibition, *Documenta 6*,<sup>3</sup> where books were displayed for the first time in the history of *Documenta*, spawned eighteen reviews in 1977 and six the following year. One-third of all the published works are, indeed, reviews of exhibitions or books. By the 1990s a number of journals devoted entire issues to the subject.<sup>4</sup>

2. The chief source for exhibition listings is *Umbrella*, which is international in scope. Others are listed, or announced, in *Print Collector's Newsletter*, *Art Monthly* and the *Annual Bibliography of Modern Art*, which lists the collections of the library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The three indexing tools for the fine arts are: *Art Index*, *Art Bibliographies Modern*, and *Répertoire international de la littérature de l'art*. (see bibliographic note)

3. *Documenta 6*, exhibition (24 June–2 October 1977). Kassel, Germany. One of the main exhibition areas was devoted to artists books, particularly of the 1970s; emphasis was on European works.

4. In 1991, *Artweek* published three articles by Judith Hoffberg, and *Visible Language* published a double issue of collected essays. In 1993,

One of the most striking aspects of the debate is the appearance of only one monograph on the subject, Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books*, published in 1995.<sup>5</sup> An anthology of essays, edited by Joan Lyons, mixing previously published articles with new writings, was published in 1985.<sup>6</sup>

A publication with almost the same title as Drucker's monograph, was published to accompany an exhibition;<sup>7</sup> however, both exhibition and catalogue were really concerned with the *livre d'artiste*. The essays here will leave aside books which fall under the genus of *livre d'artiste*.

The greatest obstacle facing the debate was stated by one of its most ardent participants, Dick Higgins, more than a decade after it began. In 1985, he reminded participants of that major obstacle: "the right language . . . . Most of our criticism in art . . . is not geared towards . . . artists books . . . that is why there is so little good criticism of the genre."<sup>8</sup>

The debate failed at times to notice what was truly occurring in the workshops, refusing to alter its course.

*Cimaise* published three related articles. In 1995, *Artweek* published an entire issue on artists books. In their May–June 1995 issue, *New Observations* and *Art et métiers du livre* published a collection of essays. And in 1996, *AbraCadaBrA* published an entire issue on artists books.

5. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995. A book by Stephen Bury, *Artists' Books*, was also published in 1995; however, its brief essays only serve as an introduction to the many illustrations of books.

6. *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985.

7. Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995.

8. Dick Higgins, "A Preface." *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985: 12.

Instead, it reiterated old words and espoused its inchoate rhetoric. Often, those who produced the books themselves were less interested in a debate which sought to defend a position which rarely existed—in many cases believing the words to have little relevance to their activities.

The one corner which had little trouble with artists books was the art library. As early as 1980, the Library of Congress accepted the term in its list of established subjects.<sup>9</sup> To date, there are no other related terms.

The principal players in the debate represented all areas of the art and book world: critic, librarian, bookmaker, historian, and artist. The debate began with all the hope, optimism, sanguinity, and fervor of the newly-born. Yet, for the most part, it has been fraught with insecurity and pessimism, lacking direction. Only by the mid-1990s does it seem to have revived, and possibly found a focus. The writings of Johanna Drucker, as well as her critics, give a renewed impetus to the debate; in some ways she has elevated the debate by laying the groundwork for a theoretical and critical foundation. However, Drucker has a mission: to establish artists books as the “quintessential twentieth-century artform.”<sup>10</sup>

A most confusing aspect of the debate is the spelling of the term *artists books*. Its first appearance, in 1973, omitted the apostrophe. Thereafter, it appeared with the apostrophe, and sometimes, without. Typographical error may explain certain cases; but there are unexplained mysteries. For example, *Art Monthly* began publishing a regular

9. *Library of Congress Subject Headings* volume 1. Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, 1980: 146.

10. Drucker: 1.

column in June 1985, using the apostrophe, i.e., *artists' books*. In January 1986, without explanation, the column title omitted the apostrophe, until its February/March issue. Then the apostrophe reappears; the text always used the apostrophe.

The journal *Umbrella*, likewise, began publishing with the apostrophe, then, in June 1994, without comment, it ceased using the apostrophe.

Carelessly, the 1985 anthology used the apostrophe in its bibliography for the important exhibition at the Moore College in Philadelphia, *Artists Books*.<sup>11</sup>

11. *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985: 254.

## A BEGINNING

In 1973, the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia displayed more than 250 examples of “many different types of books made by artists from 1960 to the present.”<sup>1</sup> The exhibition bore the title *Artists Books*,<sup>2</sup> and was organized by Diane Perry Vanderlip, the gallery’s director. It is to Vanderlip that credit for the term *artists books* is given. Her criterion for selecting pieces was simple: “if the artist conceived his work as a book, I . . . generally accepted his position.”<sup>3</sup>

The array of books was impressive, and reflected much of the art establishment of the period. Lenders included established commercial galleries, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as well as private collectors. The exhibiting artists included musicians, John Cage and Steve Reich, choreographer, Merce Cunningham, painters such as David Hockney, Robert Motherwell, Jim Dine, Ed Ruscha, Diter Rot,

1. Diane Perry Vanderlip, “Foreword.” Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973: 5.

2. The exhibition took place between 23 March–20 April 1973, after which it traveled twice. Part of the exhibition went on display at the Pratt Graphics Gallery in Brooklyn, New York in October 1973. From there it moved to the University Art Museum in Berkeley, California for an exhibition which took place between 16 January–24 February 1974.

3. Vanderlip: 5.



and many of the New York Minimalists and Conceptualists. The fiscal value of the works ranged from several dollars for a book of photocopied pages, to many thousands of dollars for a deluxe livre d'artiste.

The catalogue which accompanied the exhibition contained an introduction by Vanderlip and two brief essays: "Slices of Silence, Parcels of Time: The Book as a Portable Sculpture;"<sup>4</sup> by Lynn Lester Hershman, and "Some Thoughts on Books as Art,"<sup>5</sup> by John Perreault. Both these essays described the cultural and aesthetic criteria which encompassed many of the exhibits.

Hershman presented four issues:

1) that the effect of technology on western society of the 1960s was accelerating the "democratization of culture in which nothing is high or low, but merely a mingled sensibility that is accessible to all;"<sup>6</sup>

2) that the art of the 1960s "sought to erase the distinction between subject and object . . . art and life;"<sup>7</sup>

3) that the book is "an instrument of communication that uses symbols to convey meaning and circulates to an audience."<sup>8</sup> And while most of the books in the exhibition adopted the codex form, meaning changes with the exploitation of the different elements of the book: paper, design, layout, printing, binding, edition size;

4. Lynn Lester Hershman, "Slices of Silence, Parcels of Time: The Book as a Portable Sculpture." Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973: 8–14.

5. John Perreault, "Some Thoughts on Books as Art." Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973: 15–21.

6. Hershman: 9.

7. Ibid.: 10.

8. Ibid.: 12.

4) that the book presents and symbolizes an intimacy, a peace and a tranquillity; that a book represents a permanent reality in an impermanent world whereby access to its contents is controlled by the individual. In contrast, the sensations offered by the electronic media, are simply never-ending occurrences and moments, representing a transient world filled with dissonance where control of content and access lay beyond the realm of the individual.<sup>9</sup>

Perreault's written thoughts, for the most part, affirmed Hershman's opinions. His main points were these:

1) that the technology (of the 1960s) was gradually overtaking the printed book as an information system;

2) that a society raised on television regarded the books as a strange artifact;

3) that the æsthetic experience of an artists book is arrived at through the passing of time, as the contents of the book are slowly revealed;

4) that, in the reading of an artists book, one becomes consciously aware of that experience;

5) that cheap printing methods can and will bring about inexpensive books;

6) that distribution of artists books will capitalize on the postal system to "invade the privacy of every important critic, collector, curator and art dealer in America;"

7) that, existing within the increasingly energetic world (of the 1960s and early 1970s) artists books are "practical ... portable, personal, and ... disposable;"

8) that artist books, as art, are democratic objects, which can break down, or at least, seriously present a front against the prevailing art system.<sup>10</sup>

9. *Ibid.*: 13–14.

10. Perreault: 15–21.

The exhibition received two reviews. One appeared in *Art in America*,<sup>11</sup> written by art historian Diane Kelder. The other, published in *Print Collector's Newsletter*,<sup>12</sup> was written by Nancy Tousley, who, at publication, was assistant curator of prints and drawings at the Brooklyn Museum. The two reviews are fascinating because of a series of coincidences and, because each has a different interpretation of the meaning of the exhibition.

The two reviews looked back over the previous year, over three exhibitions which, collectively, presented the book as a chronologically-historical object. The exhibitions were: *Artists Books*; *The Book Stripped Bare: A Survey of Books by 20th Century Artists*,<sup>13</sup> shown at Hofstra University; and, *Art of the Printed Book, 1455–1955*,<sup>14</sup> on display at the Pierpont Morgan Library. The reviews discussed the exhibitions in the chronological sequence of the history of book production, from the 15th century to the end of the 20th century.

The reviews appeared in print at the same time, in the January–February 1974 issues of their respective publications. The exhibitions had closed, or moved on, by the time the reviews were published—*Artists Books* was on its way to California.<sup>15</sup> Both writers devoted only a few paragraphs

11. Diane Kelder, "Artists' Books." *Art in America* 62 (January–February 1974): 112–113.

12. Nancy Tousley, "Artists' Books." *Print Collector's Newsletter* IV, no. 6 (January–February 1974): 131–134.

13. The exhibition took place at Hofstra University, the Emily Lowe Gallery & Hofstra University Library, Hemstead, Long Island, New York, 17 September–21 October 1973.

14. The exhibition took place at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, November–December 1973.

15. Tousley mentioned the forthcoming California exhibition; Kelder discussed the exhibition as though it had ended.

to the Pierpont and Hofstra exhibitions; whereas each had much to say about the Moore College exhibition. From this point the coincidences end and their opening remarks about *Artists Books* reveal their divergent opinions.

Kelder, noting the interest in the print media which began in the early 1960s, felt, “the emergence of a specific concern with the book . . . may well prove to be the most interesting aspect of the recent . . . expansion of the graphic arts.”<sup>16</sup> Tousley, however, was less speculative, observing that “three representative exhibitions have focused attention on the art of the book and the book as art.”<sup>17</sup> She ended her opening paragraph by stating prophetically that “the art of the book is not book art.”<sup>18</sup>

Kelder regarded *Artists Books* for the most part to be concerned with the “intellectual habit of the book,”<sup>19</sup> a metaphor for certain kinds of information: “scatological autobiography,” “plain ‘bare’ facts,” “paradoxical narcissism,”—defined as “self-information,” “pseudo-technical information,” “parodies of older books,” “the functional fallacy of the xeroxing process, i.e., that identical copies are repeatedly produced.”<sup>20</sup> Kelder concluded: “the books invited a direct personal contact which makes the viewer feel that as works of art they are uniquely accessible,”<sup>21</sup> unlike paintings hanging on a gallery wall.

Tousley devoted six, out of seven, columns to *Artists Books*, the greater part to describe individual books. And to

16. Kelder: 112.

17. Tousley: 131.

18. Ibid.

19. Kelder: 112. The term was quoted from Susi Bloch who wrote the accompanying catalogue to the Hofstra exhibition.

20. Ibid.: 112–113.

21. Ibid.: 113.

lead into the discussion she regarded the works on display at the Hofstra exhibition as “precedents and antecedents for books ... by artists since 1966.”<sup>22</sup> The production of these books broke with the tradition of the hand-crafted book and exploited the newly-emerging commercial printing techniques. Furthermore, a “break with traditional typographic conventions ... made ... letters and words ... expressive elements of composition in themselves.”<sup>23</sup>

Taking her cue from these remarks, Tousley observed most of the works in *Artists Books* to be

pointed denials of uniqueness, skilled autographic facture, and high value as criteria for art objects. The majority are not made by hand with traditional means and materials. They are largely the product of commercial print and reproduction technology ... Exactly and infinitely repeatable, they are virtually indestructible. The artist’s utilization of modern mass-media technology and potentially unlimited editions makes them relatively inexpensive. In fact, most cost less than many art books. Prerequisite for ownership becomes interest alone. Potential distribution to a large audience is ideally limited only by the edition.<sup>24</sup>

Before describing the individual books, Tousley reminded readers the primary function of artists books is “ideas, not objects ... communication ... whether it is through words, words plus images, word-images as objects, sequential images as text, ‘art as idea’ or ‘book as object.’”<sup>25</sup>

22. Tousley: 131.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

Tousley's descriptions of the books began with *Ray Gun Poems*, a self-published work by Claes Oldenburg, dating from 1960. His next book, *Store Days*, was published by Something Else Press, the most important press to document and publish the activities of many of the New York avant-garde during the 1960s, including choreographer, Merce Cunningham, and composer, John Cage. An entire column, 20% of the review itself, is devoted to the books of the California-based artist, Ed Ruscha, whose importance to the genre is paramount.

The works of the Conceptualists and Minimalists of the 1960s and early 1970s fill another column—books which Tousley acknowledged as being, paradoxically, “the least exploratory of format. Physically they are what books are expected to be.”<sup>26</sup> She ends with examples of works which explore the elements of the codex book—text, images, page, materials, binding.

And Tousley ended as prophetically as she began, wondering what place there was for artists books in the art world establishment. “A well-stocked bookshelf could ... replace the ... gallery and museum ... the avowed interest of many artists now making books ... it is doubtful ... such a revolution will rock the marketplace or the temple.”<sup>27</sup>

If the Moore College of Art exhibition provided a term which eventually became established nomenclature, two exhibitions preceded it, each displaying works shown in *Artists Books*. Both were shown in 1972: one in London; the other in Los Angeles.

26. *Ibid.*: 134.

27. *Ibid.*

The Los Angeles exhibition, *Possibilities*,<sup>28</sup> took place in the Gallery of the Otis Art Institute and consisted of items from the Institute's library. The announcement to the exhibition described the objects on display as "unusual items . . . a diversified collection of book and non-book materials: artists' publications, original examples of unusual printing, limited editions, out-of-print ephemeral materials."<sup>29</sup>

The exhibition in London, *Book as Artwork* 1960/1970, held at Nigel Greenwood Inc. Ltd., derived its title from an essay by Germano Celant,<sup>30</sup> who curated the show. The catalogue was a rambling text: five pages summarizing the development of art between the late 1950s and the early 1970s; 25 pages of theory and rhetoric, intertwined with descriptions of books in chronological order of production; and ending with 17 pages listing the works.

Celant's opening sentence revealed his objectives: "This essay and list are necessarily incomplete, as they attempt to be a first analysis of books as artworks."<sup>31</sup> Celant did not use the term *artists books*, but his entire essay explored the

28. The exhibition took place 25 November–21 December 1972.

29. The announcement stated the purpose of the exhibition was to "provide primary source material for research and reference . . . the varied possibilities in the documentation of the visual arts."

30. The exhibition took place 20 September–14 October 1972. Celant had published his essay, "Book as Artwork: 1960/1970," before: *Data* 1, no. 1 (September 1971), text in Italian; and "Le Livre Comme Travail Artistique 1960–1970." *VH* 101 (Autumn 1972); "Das Buch als Kunstform 1960–1970." *Interfunktion* (1974), text in German; and in 1981, in the catalogue for the exhibition *Books by Artists*, which took place at the Art Metropole in Canada. See *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985: 234.

31. Germano Celant, "Book as Artwork: 1960/1970," catalogue essay to exhibition, *Book as Artwork*: 1.

territory which Vanderlip, with her exhibition *Artists Books*, followed one year later in Philadelphia.

Celant offered no precedents for the books on exhibit; he began his discussion with the 1960s and ended it at 1972, the year of the exhibition. His main points were these:

1) that there emerged other means of creating art besides painting and sculpture, e.g., video, performance, the body, and the book;

2) that these new means of creating art required a new and greater degree of participation and contemplation by the spectator;

3) that the rules by which art was being identified were being changed;

4) that events began principally with the Something Else Press, progressed with the works of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Ed Ruscha, Happenings, Conceptual art, 'Art as Idea.'<sup>32</sup> There were many more European artists included in Celant's exhibition and discussed in his essay than was the case in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

The published texts of these exhibition catalogues and reviews, constitute the beginnings of a debate which did not properly begin for another two years. They set the scene for the implicit and explicit political challenges on the art world. Definition was briefly offered by Perreault: "books that make art statements in their own right, within the context of art rather than of literature."<sup>33</sup> When the debate resumed, the issue over definition, the "vanguard paginated work,"<sup>34</sup> became a significant undertaking.

32. Ibid.: 1-4.

33. Perreault: 15.

34. Buzz Spector, *The Book Maker's Desire: Writings on the Art of the Book*. Pasadena, California: Umbrella Associates, 1995: 13.



## DEFINITION

The definition of artists books dominated the published debate on artists books for a full decade, after which it was essentially abandoned, only to re-emerge sporadically but with much less gusto. And, despite great efforts, the debate failed to produce a satisfactory explanation. This determination to define artists books, and its failure to do so, in many ways, serves as a metaphor for the still insecure position of artists books in the world.

As the debate progressed, the language became more and more confused, and overly verbose. And after twenty years, a sentiment of resignation closed in: “there will never be one precise definition.”<sup>1</sup> Renée Riese Hubert’s conclusion was more resolute: “any definition of an artists’ book . . . becomes irrelevant.”<sup>2</sup> Nancy Tousley, defending the impracticability of definition, characterized this unattainable aspect as its strongest virtue: “There are as many definitions of an artist’s book as there are innovative extensions of its flexible form . . . This mercurial condition . . . defines the nature of the artist’s book.”<sup>3</sup>

1. Simon Ford, “Definition of an Artists’ Book.” *Facing the Page: British Artists’ Books a Survey 1983–1993*. London: Estampe, 1993: 4.

2. Renée Riese Hubert, “An Introduction to the Artist’s Book: The Text and Its Rivals.” *Visible Language* 25, nos. 2/3 (Spring 1991): 120.

3. Nancy Tousley, “Artists’ Books.” *Learn to Read Art: Artists’ Books*. Catalogue to exhibition (15 November 1990–6 January 1991). Hamilton, Ontario: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1990: 5.

The one figure who towered above all others on this issue was Clive Phillpot, at one time Librarian to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Phillpot was often the principal speaker at conferences and he wrote extensively over a period of twenty years, in library journals, museum newsletters, exhibition catalogues, art journals. His statements evolved over time; they also changed radically, reflecting his shifting interests on the subject. And the shift moved from extraordinary enthusiasm and optimism to severe criticism and pessimism. Eventually Phillpot returned to the stance he once upheld—less hopeful but more pragmatic—about artists books and where they belong.

Phillpot began in 1976, in his essay, “Book Art Digression,” which he wrote as part of the catalogue for a traveling exhibition sponsored by the Arts Council of Great Britain. Phillpot, admitting the task arduous, described examples of ‘book art’ as works

falling into the category of book art ... defined as books in which the book form is intrinsic to the work. One way of determining this is to consider whether what is presented in a given book could equally well be shown on the wall, or still be conveyed by photocopies or photographs of the original ... book art is dependent upon the book form.<sup>4</sup>

The phrase ‘intrinsic to the work’ is the key to what follows. Here he reiterates Tousley’s statement: “the art of the book is not book art.”<sup>5</sup> Four years earlier, reviewing the book, *Reconstruction*, Phillpot considered it an “exploitation

4. Clive Phillpot, “Book Art Digressions.” *Artists’ Books* edited by Martin Attwood. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976: 40.

5. Nancy Tousley, “Artists’ Books.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* IV, no. 6 (January–February 1974): 131.

of the book form.”<sup>6</sup> His review of the book *Chinese Whispers* helped clarify the distinction; having the pages displayed on a wall in a linear sequence “destroyed the work, since it is dependent on the book form.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1977, Phillpot addressed librarians in an essay about the difficulties of building, maintaining, cataloguing and providing access to collections of artists books.<sup>8</sup> Written primarily for librarians, he stated: “artists’ books are . . . books or booklets produced by the artist using mass-production methods, and in (theoretically) unlimited numbers, in which the artist documents or realizes art ideas or artworks.”<sup>9</sup> He excluded those books which “perpetuate conventional forms,”<sup>10</sup> closing with the remark that the phrase artists books “has come to be used most widely to denote the whole phenomenon of books . . . which might be considered artworks.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout the essay, Phillpot intermixed the terms, *book art*, *book as artwork*, *artists’ bookworks*, indiscriminately.

Three years later, in 1980, Phillpot published a review of books, and a survey essay of art magazines/magazine art. In the book reviews, he confessed a need to modify his

6. Clive Phillpot, “Feedback.” *Studio International* 184, no. 947 (September 1972): 64.

7. Clive Phillpot, “Telfer Stokes & Helen Douglas.” *Studio International* 189 (March 1976): 209.

8. Clive Phillpot, “Artists Books and Book Art.” *Art Library Manual: A Guide to Resources and Practice*, edited by Philip Pacey, 355–363. New York: Bowker, 1977. Almost the exact wording was used by Phillpot in a brief column for *British Book News* (April 1977: 271) published in the same year: “books or booklets, published in numbers limited only by demand, in which the artist documents or realizes ideas or artworks.”

9. *Ibid.*: 355.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

“purist ideas regarding the nature of a bookwork.”<sup>12</sup> He explained, because “they were not inextricably dependent upon the bookform.”<sup>13</sup> And in his survey essay, Phillpot reiterated his earlier stand: “‘artists’ books’ subsumes an area designated ‘book art.’”<sup>14</sup>

In 1982, Phillpot reached a peak in his writings; thereafter, resignation afflicted him. In the first of four articles, he wrote a brief essay for an exhibition catalogue, lamenting the use of the term *artists books*, though he conceded its wide circulation. He felt the term described a “side-line of the principal activities of painters . . . or sculptors”<sup>15</sup> and regretted the disregard for those “coming to the book form from very different directions.”<sup>16</sup>

Phillpot preferred the term *book art* because it reflected a concern for the “artwork and not on the pedigree of its maker.”<sup>17</sup> As for the books themselves, he preferred the term *bookworks*, “in order to distinguish them from books which are not artworks.”<sup>18</sup> And an important distinction is made between “books as unique objects . . . and . . . books conceived for multiplication.”<sup>19</sup> The distinction is important because much of the debate concerned the multiple book, whereas the majority of the reviews of exhibitions focused

12. Clive Phillpot, “Books in Review: Artists’ Books.” *Art Journal* 39 (Spring 1980): 217.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Clive Phillpot, “Magazine Art.” *Artforum* 18, no. 6 (February 1980): 52.

15. Clive Phillpot, “Recent Art and the Book Form.” *Artists’ Books: From the Traditional to the Avant Garde*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1982: 2.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*: 3.

on the unique book, a work regarded by most as sculpture and, consequently, irrelevant to the debate.

In the May 1982 issue of *Artforum*, Phillpot wrote at length about definition, gathering categories of 'book art' and separating each one to refine his perceptions of artists books. He stated, the term

'artists' books' seems to be applied more and more confusingly to anything in an art context that resembles a book. . . . One of the first occasions . . . 'artists' books' was used . . . implied that it referred to 'books made by artists.' I . . . would like to expand it so that artists' books are defined as those books made or conceived by artists.<sup>20</sup>

He gave two reasons for the acceptance of the term, *artists books*: first, "a definite need to stake out territory that excluded the moribund *art-of-the-book* tradition, with its links to the art-book industry;"<sup>21</sup> and second, he asserted there was the "implicit suggestion that artists' books were just a sideline for artists whose principal activity was . . . painting or sculpture."<sup>22</sup> Phillpot reluctantly accepted the term, for "it seems, for all its faults, to be here to stay,"<sup>23</sup> however, he persevered with the subdividing and categorizing of unique books and books made in an edition, limited or unlimited.

What distinguished the unique book from the multiple edition is "primarily a difference of philosophy that separates their makers."<sup>24</sup> For Phillpot, a unique work may

20. Clive Phillpot, "Books Bookworks Book Objects Artists' Books." *Artforum* 20, no. 9 (May 1982): 77.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

maintain its craft identity, whilst retaining its “precious object status.”<sup>25</sup> They become, however, book objects, or sculpture. Paradoxically, Phillpot was willing to concede:

unique books can still be bookworks ... for example, the unique maquette for a multiple book is virtually identical to one of the multiple copies that it generates, and therefore shares those properties excepting only its expendability.<sup>26</sup>

The proliferation of the multiple is vigorously defended by Phillpot, in order “to make art more accessible through multiplication ... there is always another one. There is no *one* original ... each copy of a bookwork *is* the artwork.”<sup>27</sup> In the midst of this article, Phillpot asks why the works might not simply be regarded as books or *book art*, just as there are now accepted terms such as video art, performance art or computer art. This rather simple, yet extremely subtle, question has essentially been ignored.

Phillpot included a diagram to aid his cause: two overlapping circles with a hexagon nestled in at the intersection. One circle represents the entire spectrum of art; the other, the world of books. The hexagon represents the world of artists books. And within the hexagon lie three small areas, representing Phillpot’s sub-categories: book objects, bookworks and books. He described the representations as a “diagram indicating the overlapping territories of books, artists’ books, and art.”<sup>28</sup>

Phillpot’s third published work of the year appeared during his term as editor to the principal journal for art

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

librarians, *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America*. Phillpot wrote a brief introduction to the subject which was followed by several short articles by his colleagues. His opening words were brief and somewhat resigned: “the very phrase ‘artists’ book’ is still of wide compass.”<sup>29</sup> It was, however, the cover of the journal which carried the fascinating bibliographic subjects with definitions.

The listing is as follows:

**BOOK** Collection of blank and/or image-bearing sheets usually fastened together along one edge and trimmed at the other edges to form a single series of uniform leaves.

**ART BOOK** Book of which art or an artist is the subject.

**ARTIST’S BOOK** Book of which an artist is the author.

**BOOK ART** Art which employs the book form.

**BOOKWORK** Artwork dependent upon the structure of a book.

**BOOK OBJECT** Art object which alludes to the form of a book.<sup>30</sup>

After a two-year hiatus, Phillpot returned to the debate, but his words were strongly critical. In a panel discussion about the problems of distributing artists books, Phillpot,

29. Clive Phillpot, “An ABC of Artists’ Books Collections.” *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 1, no. 6 (December 1982): 169.

30. Cover, *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 1, no. 6 (December 1982).

making note of the difficulties of even securing an audience for the books, ended in frustration: “the very phrase *artists’ books* may prevent us from getting outside the artworld . . . these books shouldn’t acquire that almost pejorative label *artists’ books*—they are books.”<sup>31</sup>

In April of the following year Phillipot delivered the keynote speech at a conference in Boston and it was clear that none of his frustrations had abated. The lecture bore the title, “The Success and Failure of Books by Artists,” and he was extremely critical of many new books by artists and suspicious of their motives. He attacked the audience by speaking against artists books as works of art, a cause he had championed for so long. His motive, hitherto unspoken, was for a book which would combat the rising tide of illiteracy: “The emergence of these fetishized book objects is akin to the growth of fungi on a tree that is dead or decaying. The book is sick.”<sup>32</sup> This was a radical move for Phillipot, and, remarkably, he never returned to the fight against illiteracy. Criticisms, however, did continue.

In 1985 Phillipot contributed to the first published anthology of artists books where he continued his criticism of writers and critics who, “take a purist view . . . of so-called artists’ books . . . books which happen to be by artists and do not differ fundamentally from books by writers, scientists, gardeners, or philosophers.”<sup>33</sup> He applied the

31. Quoted from Anne Edgar, “A Conversation with Printed Matter.” *Afterimage* 12, no. 6 (January 1985): 11.

32. Quoted from David Trend, “At the Margins: Artists’ Books in the 80’s.” *Afterimage* 13, no 1 & 2 (Summer 1985): 3.

33. Clive Phillipot, “Some Contemporary Artists and Their Books.” *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985: 106.



definitions for bookwork and book object which appeared on the cover of the art librarian's journal three years earlier, but he elaborated at length:

If one is concerned with the book as artwork, then bookworks are generally the most significant of the subdivisions of book art. Multiple bookworks, as opposed to unique bookworks, are also more expressive of the nature, and indeed the purpose of the book. Unique bookworks are often only one step away from mute sculptural book objects that at best simply provoke reflections on the history and role of the book as a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, art conceived for mechanical replication, and which therefore incorporates exactly repeatable verbal, visual, or verbi-visual narratives, is not only realized through the agency of the printing press, but as a result, is also disseminated more widely. Compared with the unique artwork, the multiple artwork has an enormously expanded potential audience simply because of the multiplication of its locations, for the original artwork can reside at each location simultaneously. Art presented almost surreptitiously in the familiar form of the book also achieves the potential to reach many people who would not cross a threshold framed with classical columns in order to see books or art behind glass.<sup>34</sup>

Thereafter, with the single exception of a review of the books of Richard Long, and a reflection upon his thoughts, there was an eight-year break from writing. Phillipot's review of Long's books is shrouded with resignation. He noted

34. *Ibid.*: 106–107.

simply that artists books were an “inexpensive . . . medium . . . for . . . artworks.”<sup>35</sup>

In his reflections, he compared the activities of those engaged in bookmaking during the early 1980s with those who began in the 1960s:

at least three streams of activity seem to be discernible. First, a minority . . . engaged in fashioning visual languages articulated by the book structure. . . . Second, the collectible, the book as investment, whether the expensive limited editions or as unique mute book objects. Third, a proliferation of work by book makers who would seem to have taken up with books instead of sticking to knitting.<sup>36</sup>

Phillpot was interviewed in 1990 about his impressions of a day-long symposium on artists books where he had been one of the speakers.<sup>37</sup> In the preliminary remarks of the published interview, the interviewer, Nancy Princenthal, pointed out about the definition of an artists book—“this central issue was never directly addressed.”<sup>38</sup> Phillpot was asked if his avoidance of the definition was deliberate. He believed not. As one of the major figures of the debate during the 1970s and 1980s, Phillpot conceded

35. Clive Phillpot, “Richard Long’s Books and the Transmission of Sculptural Images.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* xviii, no. 4 (September–October) 1987: 128.

36. Quoted from Cathy Courtney, “A Developing Genre.” *Art Monthly* 102 (December–January 1987): 32–33.

37. The symposium took place at the Dia Art Foundation in New York City on 18 November 1990. The symposium had no title listed. It was a jointly-sponsored project of Dia and Printed Matter Bookstore about artists books, celebrating the Bookstore’s new location.

38. Nancy Princenthal, “Artist’s Book Beat: Interview with Clive Phillpot.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* xx, no. 6 (January–February 1990): 225.

that “it didn’t match what was happening . . . and I stopped bothering with the attempt to define the field, because it didn’t seem to be very productive . . . . I was not satisfied in giving a shape to something, when the shape didn’t match what was out there.”<sup>39</sup>

Phillpot did return to the matter of definition three years later. In his final published effort to date, once again he aimed at the art librarian, his resigned outlook evolved into the pragmatic, expressed in the title: “Twentysix Gasoline Stations that Shook the World: the Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art.”<sup>40</sup> Phillpot outlined the impact of Ruscha’s book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* as prelude to his discussion of work by European and other North American artists. The matter of definition was scattered throughout the article, yet the scene was set right from the start:

let me attempt to clarify the language . . . . Until about 1970 the term ‘artists’ books’ was used as a synonym for, or a translation of the phrase, ‘livres d’artistes,’ or . . . ‘livre de luxe,’ luxury editions . . . signed and numbered, limited editions. . . . The phrase ‘artists’ books’ took hold—for about fifteen years—as a description of those booklets by artists that were published cheaply in ‘unlimited’ or ‘open’ editions.<sup>41</sup>

Phillpot included the same diagrams he used in 1982 (adopting different shapes) to “clarify what I mean, and what others might agree about, in this field.”<sup>42</sup>

39. *Ibid.*: 226.

40. Clive Phillpot, “Twentysix Gasoline Stations That Shook the World: the Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art.” *Art Libraries Journal* 18, no. 1 (1993): 4–13. The article was first presented as a text to the 4th European Conference of IFLA Section of Art Libraries, at Oxford in April 1992.

41. *Ibid.*: 4–5.

42. *Ibid.*: 5.

The first diagram presents four concentric circles bisected by a vertical line. The outer circle represents the field of art; within this lies a circle representing book arts; within this, a circle representing artists' books; finally, within all three, lies the smallest circle, representing bookworks. The area to the left of the vertical line represents unique works; that to the right, multiple works. Thus, Phillpot is saying bookworks are simply one manifestation of artists' books, be they one-of-a-kind, or in an edition form, open-ended or limited.

The second diagram consists of three outline drawings: an apple, which represents art; a pear, which represents books, and a lemon, which represents artists books.

The third diagram overlaps the fruit-shaped outlines. The area where the outlines overlap represents the region of artists books, which for Phillpot, can be book objects, bookworks and literary books. He concluded:

Everything falls into place ... works which are not (visual) art, are simply 'literary books.' Works which are not books, are simply sculptural 'book objects' .... So 'artists' books' embraces these two categories, as well as the core concept of the 'bookwork,' the artwork that is dependent upon the book structure to articulate its content.<sup>43</sup>

After two decades of writing about artists books, Phillpot ended on a note of optimism: "there is hope for the artists' bookwork."<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, Lucy Lippard, gained notoriety in the debate with a single essay, "The Artists' Book Goes

43. *Ibid.*: 6.

44. *Ibid.*: 12.

Public,”<sup>45</sup> published in 1977. Fired with enthusiasm, and published four years after the *Artists Books* exhibition, the essay celebrated new beginnings. In the previous year Lippard had co-founded an archive for artists books, Franklin Furnace, in New York City. She was also a strong supporter of Printed Matter, a center for the distribution of artists books which also opened in New York in 1976. The opening, and hopes, of both facilities were the primary focus of Lippard’s essay.

The first half of her essay dwelt on definition and a summary of the “ancestors of artists’ books as we know them now.”<sup>46</sup> The listing of precedents is no different from those outlined by Kelder and Tousley in 1974. For Lippard, the artists book “is a product of the 1960s which is already in its second, and potentially permanent, wind.”<sup>47</sup> And then, the definition:

Neither an art book . . . nor a book on art . . . the artists’ book is a work of art on its own, conceived specifically for the book form and often published by the artist him/herself. It can be visual, verbal, or visual/verbal. With few exceptions, it is all of a piece, consisting of one serial work or a series of closely related ideas and/or images—a portable exhibition. . . . Usually inexpensive in price, modest in format and ambitious in scope, the artists’ book is also a fragile vehicle for a weighty load of hopes and ideals.<sup>48</sup>

45. Lucy R. Lippard, “The Artists’ Book Goes Public.” *Art in America* 65, no. 1 (January–February 1977): 40–41.

46. *Ibid.*: 40.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

At the close of the article, Lippard reminded the reader that there existed a limitation, as well as a major responsibility, for artists books. Though defined “by an art context, where it still has a valuable function to serve . . . the artists’ book offers . . . a more intimate communication than a conventional art object.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, she warned: “[with] an expanding audience and an increased popularity with collectors, the artists’ book will fall back into its *édition de luxe* or coffee table origins.”<sup>50</sup>

Lippard contributed an essay to the 1985 anthology on artists books, where she reflected upon the thoughts and hopes described in her earlier article, contrasting them to her feelings on artists books of the mid–1980s. The essay was entitled, “Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists’ Books.”<sup>51</sup> The explicit tone of her feelings was expressed in her first sentence: “The artists’ book is/was a great idea whose time has either not come, or come and gone.”<sup>52</sup> And despite her ominous disposition, she nestled into careful optimism: “all is not lost, just misplaced.”<sup>53</sup> She felt the necessity “to define an ‘artists’ book’ for any but a specialized audience.”<sup>54</sup> And, once again, in a repetition of her earlier words, somewhat sparser in tone: “artists’ books are not books about art or on artists, but books *as* art. They can be all words, all images, or combinations thereof. At best they are a lively hybrid of exhibition, narrative, and object.”<sup>55</sup>

49. *Ibid.*: 41.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Lucy R. Lippard, “Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists’ Books.” *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985: 49–57

52. *Ibid.*: 49.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

Lippard ended her thoughts with pessimism and guarded optimism. “Artists’ books are best defined as whatever isn’t anything else.”<sup>56</sup> She did recognize the paradox, “this negative definition defines the trap of inaccessibility . . . just another instance of artistic escapism, elitism, and self-indulgence.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, her closing remarks envisioned artists books to be a “significant subcurrent beneath the artworld mainstream.”<sup>58</sup>

The third oft-quoted voice was Ulises Carrión, who wrote a series of essays between 1975 and 1979 about books and the making of books.<sup>59</sup> As a poet and maker of books, his interest embodied all aspects of the codex form: the writing of a text, the production of books, how books influence reading, and how he felt books ought to be read. Throughout his writing Carrión aimed for a new aesthetic; always making comparisons between *old* books, i.e., traditionally-made books, trade publications, or even limited edition fine books, and *new* books, i.e., the books he was interested in devising, wanting to spread, talking about and lecturing upon.

Carrión’s first essay *The New Art of Making Books*<sup>60</sup> never used the phrase ‘artists books’ except in a reference to a later essay of his. Instead, he presented 141 statements,

56. *Ibid.*: 56.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. These essays were published as a collection in 1980, *Second Thoughts*.

60. Ulises Carrión, “The New Art of Making Books.” *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distributors, 1980: 7–23. The essay first appeared in *Plural*, no. 41 in Mexico City published in Spanish in 1975. An English translation appeared later in the same year in a Dutch journal, *Kontexts*, no. 6/7, and is the basis of the essay published in *Second Thoughts* as well as many exhibition catalogues and lectures.

in six sections, about the making of a new and different kind of book.

The essay was originally intended for a literary audience and the text is full of allusions to poets and the writing of poetry, but it was an audience of visual artists who listened. Artists books were seen as a new form of bookmaking by definition, and it was because visual artists grasped his message, rather than literary figures, that he entered into the debate.

Carrión always preferred the term *bookworks* to describe the objects he was writing about. His original definition of *bookworks* was “books that are conceived as an expressive unity ... where the message is the sum of all the material and formal elements.”<sup>61</sup> He expanded this to include “books that use other, non-formal aspects: books as document, as object, as idea.”<sup>62</sup>

In November 1979, Carrión attended the conference *Options in Independent Art Publishing*, organized by The Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, where he elaborated on earlier thoughts about books. The published speech appeared as a list of 29 paragraphs. And, referring to his dislike of the term “artists’ books,” he wrote, in paragraph 19: “I’d rather opt for ‘bookworks,’ which frees these from artists’ appropriation, at the same time underlining the book

61. Ulises Carrión, “From Bookworks to Mailworks.” *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distributors, 1980: 25. The essay first appeared in 1978 as a catalogue introduction to an exhibition of the same name in Alkmaar. The sections are: What a Book Is; Prose and Poetry; The Space; The Language; Structures; The Reading.

62. *Ibid.*: 26.



as a form, as an autonomous work.”<sup>63</sup> Carrión accepted the term “artists’ books” as a catch-all term, for “all books made by artists, whatever these books might be, thereby including catalogues, biographies, etc.”<sup>64</sup>

In paragraph 21 Carrión begins his move towards a definition of bookworks. He asks the question: “on what grounds can we differentiate between real bookworks and all other sorts of artists’ publications?”<sup>65</sup> His own unsatisfactory reply led to his next question: “what are we to understand as ‘the bookform’?”<sup>66</sup> And thus to his definition of bookwork: “books in which the book form, a coherent series of pages, is intrinsic to the work.”<sup>67</sup> But this definition also fell short, because it could include literary texts. Carrión’s solution was to include the reading experience.

In paragraph 24 he presents his definition of bookworks, which was often quoted thereafter: “books in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work.”<sup>68</sup> Carrión excluded unique, one-of-a-kind objects, which he regarded as works expressing “a sculptural approach and [which] should be treated as such.”<sup>69</sup>

This discussion of the definition of artists books ends with Nancy Tousley, one of the first participants; and Johanna Drucker, one who entered much later.

63. Ulises Carrión, “Bookworks Revisited.” *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distributors, 1980: 66.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*: 67.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*: 68.

69. *Ibid.*: 57.

In 1990, Nancy Tousley curated an exhibition in Canada, *Learn to Read Art: Artists' Books*, and wrote an essay for the accompanying catalogue.<sup>70</sup> She asked, and offered an answer, to the question, what is an artists book? Her first attempt, which she acknowledged as being simplistic, was: “a book made by an artist.”<sup>71</sup> But this simple statement was expanded, with a warning: “this contemporary classification is full of implications for the role of the artist, the role of the book and the reader’s most basic experience of reading.”<sup>72</sup> But there was no discourse to the implications.

Tousley gave a brief outline of the history of book production, from the medieval period to the early 1970s. Once again, the history is chronologically linear, exactly as her review essay of the exhibition *Artists Books*: from late 19th-century *livre d’artiste*, early 20th-century works by Dada and the Surrealists, the literary and small press movements of the 1950s, Correspondence artists, Conceptualists, the Something Else Press, the books of Ed Ruscha. Feminist works, which were relatively new, were also included.<sup>73</sup> Tousley attested to numerous attempts at definition, concluding that artists book are a “mercurial condition . . . experimenting continuously, reshaping and expanding the form . . . an affordable, portable, mailable, durable democratic art.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, she was aware that “these works have been slow to reach the wider public.”<sup>75</sup> And

70. Tousley: 4–17.

71. *Ibid.*: 4.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*: 5–7.

74. *Ibid.*: 5.

75. *Ibid.*

ending on a nostalgic note, Tousley offered hope in an ever-insensible world:

Turning to a shelf of artists' books, one can re-enter an intimate encounter with a work of art. Artists' books offer oases in a media-saturated world, antidotes to mega-shows and mega-spectacles, something real, something imagined, something to stimulate both the senses and thought presented through a one-on-one relationship experienced in privacy. An artist's book made by an artist that can invoke the wondrous initial experiences of childhood reading, as we learn to read and see at the same time, all over again.<sup>76</sup>

The final words go to Johanna Drucker as the debate entered the mid-1990s. In the opening remarks of the first, and thus far, only monograph about artists books, Drucker, exalts in what she considers the long-awaited recognition of artists books—"a form in their own right, not a . . . spin-off of other concerns."<sup>77</sup>

Though Drucker iterates comments made by others, her comments about definition are set in a positive and optimistic light: "there are no specific criteria for defining what an artist's book is, but there are many criteria for defining what it is not, or what it partakes of, or what it distinguished itself from."<sup>78</sup> And in ten of her fourteen succeeding chapters, Drucker examines ten forms of the artists book with great earnestness.

76. *Ibid.*: 17.

77. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995: vii.

78. *Ibid.*: 14.

What makes Drucker's approach unique is how she describes books, identifying those qualities which establish it as an artists book, yet demonstrating when a work fails as an artists book. Her reasons were "not to establish policies of exclusion, but to put fundamental parameters into place for critical evaluation of artists' books as an artistic practice."<sup>79</sup> And, recognizing a failing, Drucker expounds:

Most attempts to define an artists' book . . . are hopelessly flawed . . . or too specific. Artists' books take every possible form, participate in every possible convention of book making, every possible 'ism' of mainstream art and literature, every possible mode of production, every shape, every degree of ephemerality or archival durability.<sup>80</sup>

Drucker's mission was explicit: "to put fundamental parameters into place for critical evaluation of artists' books as an artistic practice which will allow them to position themselves . . . within a mainstream arena of the arts."<sup>81</sup>

The critic Nancy Princenthal described this positioning as subversive, where artists books "can most effectively exert pressure on traditions of both art and bookmaking by refusing to resolve its allegiances"<sup>82</sup> to either. The book could be both codex and art.

79. Johanna Drucker, "Critical Necessities." *The Journal of Artists' Books* 4 (Fall 1995): 4.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. Nancy Princenthal, "Recent Artists' Books, or How to Invest \$100 in Artists' Books Published Since 1980." *Print Collector's Newsletter* xv, no. 2 (May-June 1984): 52.

## ART AS A BOOK

The codex form was the principal vehicle used by the Conceptualists for the dissemination of their ideas about art and their ideas as art.<sup>1</sup> It proved, at first, an ideal way of distributing their ideas about art which they could control themselves since the galleries, initially, excluded them from exhibiting their works. These two precepts—dissemination and exhibition—were the political components in the debate on artists books.

At least two philosophical and æsthetic questions pre-occupied the Conceptualists: the idea of art as its own subject; and, the desire for a ‘dematerialized’ object, a term coined by Lippard.<sup>2</sup> She later corrected this contradiction, stating a move towards the “process of dematerialization, or a deemphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness).<sup>3</sup>

The codex form proved ideal for the communication and dissemination of art as an idea. Documentation of the

1. Some argue that Fluxus and the Happenings, which are often cited as pre-cursors to artists books, belong here; yet, their interest in the book is not significant. Their relevance concerns issues of what constitutes art and what is the artist’s role. The form of publications which came out of Fluxus, particularly Dick Higgins and his *Something Else Press* became important as an influence on later artists books.

2. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973: 5.

3. Ibid.

idea was sufficient and the art object was, at first, considered irrelevant. However, the documentation of the idea, the insignificant codex book itself, soon became the art object. The question of an irrelevant object was, initially, as much a political issue as it was aesthetic: to engage in a battle with the current art establishment.

Books produced by the Conceptualists had a common social aesthetic; those following lacked this egalitarianism. Schwarz warned against artists books as genre-defined:

The autonomous book represented a historical reflex as well as the attempt to popularize art objects ... it took the problems posed by the presentation of new artistic practices ... to devise a genuinely different approach to the book ... a response to an artistic and social need and a reaction to a changing historical context. Books published later ... with their conspicuous lack of a common denominator ... must be viewed within this context and cannot be generalized ... as a genre.<sup>4</sup>

The engagement, however, was short-lived. By the early 1970s the work of the Conceptualists had been completely absorbed by the international art system. Major exhibitions celebrated art which questioned art; books which were art objects quickly became collectors items. They had gained the status of commodity joining the ranks of the paintings and sculpture for sale in the major galleries around the world,<sup>5</sup> having “passed into art history.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Perreault realized this point by the mid-1970s: “time has shown how

4. Dieter Schwarz, *Lawrence Weiner Books 1968–1989: Catalogue Raisonné*. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 1989: 125–126.

5. *Ibid.*: 263–264.

6. Judith Collins, “London, Crafts Council: The Artist Publisher” *The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 1005 (December 1986): 918.

economically healthy the art system is and how easily it has assimilated supposedly non-gallery and non-saleable art.”<sup>7</sup>

Approval and acceptance of the art of the Conceptualists helped to make the book an acceptable vehicle for those who followed. Yet there was a tacit acceptance of the book as an art object within the gallery and museum. Paradoxically, the Conceptualists had little, if any, interest in the codex form. Indeed, the art objects were, as Carrión pointed out, poor examples of the book as an object.<sup>8</sup> Ed Ruscha, one of the major influences in artists books, confessed to having no interest in the book as an object: “what I am after is . . . a mass-produced product . . . none of the nuances of the hand-made and crafted limited edition book.”<sup>9</sup>

Celant emphasized the communication goals of artists. He regarded the book as simply one of a number of new formats which arose in the early 1960s.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition *Book as Artwork 1960–1972* posed questions about the nature of art. The exhibition *Artists Books*, which made no mention of Celant’s essay, not only questioned the nature of art;

7. John Perreault, “Introduction,” *TriQuarterly* 32 (Winter 1975): [5]. The sub-title to this issue of the journal is ‘Anti-Object Art.’ Perreault described the issue “not ‘about’ art but as art. It is a portable exhibition, rather like a major museum show, but with one significant difference: it takes up very little space. . . . In most cases, the pages that follow are art works in themselves or extensions or reflections of inaccessible or ephemeral art works.” *Ibid.*: [1–2].

8. Ulises Carrión, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distributions, 1980: 66. Nancy Tousley, in her review of *Artists Books*, brought out the same contradiction, namely, that the Conceptualists produced the most book-like of works: 134.

9. John Coplans, “Concerning ‘Various Small Fires’: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications.” *Artforum* 3, no. 5 (February 1965): 25.

10. Germano Celant, *Book as Artwork 1960/72*. London: Nigel Greenwood, 1972: 5.

it pondered the nature of books as objects. Hershman and Perreault, in their catalogue essays to *Artists Books*, take up different approaches to the communicative intentions of artists arguing from opposite ends of the same issue.

Hershman viewed “the preoccupation of . . . artists with the production of books . . . in a new, sculptural application”<sup>11</sup> as a reaction to changes in a technological society. The traditional definition of the book as communication was expanded by the use of non-traditional materials, to create a hybrid, in which the past and the present merge.<sup>12</sup>

Perreault argued that freeing art of its “communications factor”<sup>13</sup> would provide “a ready-made form for artists to . . . utilize, a found structure that is outside traditional art formats and therefore not weighed down by history.”<sup>14</sup>

Freedom from the past was important for Ruscha’s bookmaking and gave him great satisfaction because the activity was so unlike the activity of painting. He believed painting suffered from the weight of its own history whilst making books was free of such history: “I’ve never followed tradition in my books.”<sup>15</sup> He did receive help from the printers who helped him design his early books. The printers were quite aware of the history of bookmaking.<sup>16</sup>

11. Lynn Lester Hershman, “The Book as a Portable Sculpture.” Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia, Moore College of Art, 1973: 11.

12. *Ibid.*: 12.

13. John Perreault, “Some Thoughts on Books as Art.” Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia, Moore College of Art, 1973: 16.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Gary Lloyd, “A Talk with Ed Ruscha,” *The Dumb Ox* (Spring 1977): 7.

16. Henri Man Barendse, “Ed Ruscha: An Interview.” *Afterimage* no. 7 (February 1981): 9; Gary Lloyd, “A Talk with Ed Ruscha.” *The Dumb Ox* 4 (Spring 1977): 5.



The exhibition *Artists Books* was pivotal in the transition of the book-as-idea to the book-as-object. The new focus was on the book as a self-conscious object; previously, it had been the subconscious object. The exhibition signified the end of one era, best summed up by the exhibition *Book as Artwork 1960–1972*, and, the beginning of another, which it helped instigate. Once this transition occurred, the art world essentially looked away for two decades. Most exhibitions took place inside museums, libraries, book archives and retail and distribution outlets.

The conceptual framework for artists books now had two routes. The first rejected the finely crafted book in favor of an unlimited multiple edition; the second framed the book as sculpture, a single unique object. It was the notorious exhibition, *Documenta 6*, which proved to be a celebration of books as sculpture, where the “common thread . . . is sadistic destruction . . . anything to make the book both unreadable and unhandsome.”<sup>17</sup> The exhibition had a particularly European bias.

The debate ignored unique books; it demanded they be criticized as sculpture. Yet by the mid–1980s bookmakers created more unique objects, or sculpture. This was reflected in exhibition reviews: unique books were easier to write about than books retaining the codex, appearing very much like ordinary books, but considered art.

Tousley recognized the distinction from the beginning, unique book objects “expanded . . . in many provocative

17. Theodore Allen Heinrich, “Sculpture for Hercules: documenta 6.” *Artscanada* 216/217 (October–November 1977): 16. This was the first occasion the *Documenta*, in Kassel, Germany, exhibited books.

ways”<sup>18</sup> the book form, whilst the works of the Something Else Press published works created by visual artists, poets, composers and choreographers to document ideas or activities. Spector, a maker of unique works himself, reflected on changes of the 1980s, considered the widening interest as an “increasing retrograde fetishization of the book form.”<sup>19</sup>

The Conceptualists showed that dissemination of the art was part of the experience itself: exhibitions were possible anywhere; books were inexpensive, sometimes free—the costs borne by the artists. These were precedents for artists books: to make art as cheap as possible and to offer it to a public away from the art gallery system. This quickly became an anthem in the debate.

Tousley recognized the intent of the artists but remained dubious: a “well-stocked bookshelf could . . . replace the art gallery and museum . . . it is doubtful that such a revolution will rock the marketplace or the temple.”<sup>20</sup> Lippard was much more direct, artists book are

all of a piece . . . a portable exhibition. But unlike an exhibition, the artists’ book reflects no outside opinions and thus permits artists to circumvent the commercial gallery system as well as to avoid misrepresentation by critics and other middle people . . . considered by many the easiest way out of the art world.<sup>21</sup>

18. Nancy Tousley, “Artists’ Books.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* IV, no. 6 (January–February 1974): 134.

19. Buzz Spector, *The Book Maker’s Desire: Writings on the Art of the Book*. Pasadena, California: Umbrella Associates, 1995: 13.

20. Tousley: *Ibid.*

21. Lucy R. Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public.” *Art in America* 65, no. 1 (January–February 1977): 40.

The explicit objective of offering art outside of the museum and commercial art world was clearly stated by many of the participants in the debate. In fact, the desire to operate independently was, in some way, intrinsic to a definition of artists books. The availability of an inexpensive art was as important as independence of access. This was the second anthem in the debate: “the democratization of the art object,” a ubiquitous, yet, ignoble term.<sup>22</sup>

In 1976, Baldessari made his infamous comment about art which has been quoted ad nauseum: “every artist should have a cheap line. It keeps art ordinary.”<sup>23</sup> In that same year, the retail outlet, Printed Matter, and the archive, Franklin Furnace, opened their doors. Other outlets soon followed elsewhere in Canada, Europe, and around the United States. The purpose was to offer the intimate experience of art as an ordinary object to the many, as opposed to the experience of the *precious objects*<sup>24</sup> of the commercial galleries for the few. Furthermore, these outlets were to foster control of the experience of the art without restriction. The correlation was quickly made that an art for a mass audience was tantamount to a *democratization of art*.

22. The concept is not new. Darnton made similar observations over the history of the publication of the *Encyclopédie*. By the late 18th century, the publishers, having saturated the market for the luxurious folio editions, wanted to bring out editions which were advertised in prospectuses as ‘*vues économiques*.’ The term *democratization* is as much a matter of economics as it is a different kind of marketing. Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775–1800*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979: 274.

23. John Baldessari, “Definitions.” *Art-Rite* 14 (Winter 1976–1977): 6.

24. Lawrence Alloway, “Artists as Writers, Part Two: the Realm of Language.” *Artforum* 12, no. 8 (April 1974): 33.

The term *democratization of art* was used by Hershman and Perreault in 1973, but each intoned very different messages. Hershman was critical of the term, as if reflecting a “dehumanized and desensitized” society.<sup>25</sup> Perreault saw it as a boon in the increasing velocity of the world of the 1960s and 1970s, where, if necessary, art could indeed be disposable.<sup>26</sup> The term resurfaced in 1977 shrouded with pessimism: the “democratic and anti-institutional potential of artists’ books to circumvent the gallery structure through their low cost and to decentralize the art system . . . has never been fulfilled.”<sup>27</sup>

These words were sobering observations so early in the debate, but they were neglected by the majority of observers, who were ever vigilant and overly optimistic. Phillips, echoing Lippard, stated, “artists still seek ways to liberate themselves from the ‘tyranny of the object’ and to reach out more directly to their audience.”<sup>28</sup>

A myth began to appear, in which artists books were seen to be opposed to all forms of commerce and to be resistant to the forces of a market economy. Expressed naively, the term *dematerialization of the object* evolved into the phrase *non-objective art*.<sup>29</sup>

25. Lynn Lester Hershman, “Slices of Silence: The Book as a Portable Sculpture.” Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973: 9.

26. John Perreault, “Some Thoughts on Books as Art.” Catalogue to exhibition *Artists Books* (23 March–20 April 1973). Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973: 21.

27. Edit DeAk and Walter Robinson, “Printed Matter and Artists’ Books.” *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal* 13 (January–February 1977): 29.

28. Deborah C. Phillips, “Definitely Not Suitable for Framing.” *Artnews* 80, no. 10 (December 1981): 64.

29. Tim Guest and Yusuke Nakahara, *Artists’ Books: “Pictures and Illustrators.”* Catalogue to exhibition (March 1983). Tokyo: Gallery Lunani, 1983: 12.

Guest indeed saw the inherent contradictions:

artists' books typify this interest in non-objectivity and reflect the internal contradictions of such an ideal . . . . They are affordable, accessible and as plebeian as an art object can be . . . they are almost too exemplary of the non-objective ideal. As books they are not commercially viable simply because they defy the expectations of a mass market by presenting avant-garde information. Yet they have few patrons in the art world because their affordability to the public represents a low profit for a dealer.<sup>30</sup>

Entrenched in this sentiment was the concept of the unlimited edition book as a work of art. Any form of opposition to exclusivity was seen as a way to de-emphasize most, if not all, of the components of the art object. Thus was born the odious concept of the *democratic* art form.

As a *democratic* art form, Spector saw the book as “a function of its numbers, circulating among legions of readers . . . its language . . . public.”<sup>31</sup> Lippard espoused the belief that “when they [books] are cheap and mass-produced, they are freer than most objects from the wages of marketing.”<sup>32</sup>

Just as the term *dematerialization* was unfortunate, the same is true for the term *democratic*. Its use gainsaid what really was occurring. Phillipot recognized this discrepancy when he decided to lay to rest “the attempt to define the field . . . giving a shape to something, when the shape didn't

30. *Ibid.*: 13.

31. Buzz Spector, “The Book Alone: Object and Fetishism.” Catalogue to exhibition *Books as Art* (30 August–6 October 1991). Boca Raton: Museum of Art, 1991: 38.

32. Lucy R. Lippard, “Doubled Over.” Catalogue to exhibition *Visual Satire: Artists' Books* (8 January–7 February 1988). Tallahassee, FL, Florida State University: Fine Arts Gallery and Museum, 1988: 5.

match what was out there.”<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the term, continued to spread, shouldering the burden of high aspiration.

In 1978, Larson, reviewing a Los Angeles exhibition, described the books as weapons of “a more democratic medium, a relatively low-cost multiple able to subvert the one-of-a-kind preciousness of the art marketplace.”<sup>34</sup> The rejection of the *precious object* in favour of the humble, inexpensive kind was taken literally by Louise Lincoln. Writing about bookmaking during the 1970s, she pointed out how expensive art lay within the province of the wealthy few; makers of artists books “have made a conscious decision to put art quite literally into people’s hands.”<sup>35</sup> Olin was extreme: “book art is a democratic art which needs neither galleries nor critics for its dissemination.”<sup>36</sup> Scott, craving social upheaval, assessed the function of copier books as “engaged in a democratic revolution . . . artists are trying to reclaim the book from the publisher, to devalue the precious limited edition, to democratize the book.”<sup>37</sup> Simon was equally adamant: “anyone with access to a typewriter, Xerox machine or photo-offset service can produce them quickly and inexpensively.”<sup>38</sup>

33. Clive Phillpot, “Interview in Artists’ Book Beat.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* xx, no. 6 (January–February 1990): 226.

34. Susan C. Larson, “A Booklover’s Dream.” *Artnews* 77, no. 5 (May 1978): 146.

35. Louise Lincoln, Introduction in catalogue to exhibition *Bookmaking in the ’70s: Redefining the Artists’ Book* (13 July–16 September 1979). Minneapolis: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1979: n.p.

36. Ferris Olin, “Artists’ Books: From the Traditional to the Avant-Garde.” *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 1, no. 6 (December 1963): 173.

37. Joanna Scott, “You Can’t Judge a Book by Its Cover.” *Afterimage* 15, no. 6 (January 1988): 4.

38. Joan Simon, “The Art Book Industry: Problems and Prospects.” *Art in America* 71, no. 6 (Summer 1983): 21.

After almost a decade of such sentiments, the failure of producing and disseminating an inexpensive art became apparent, producing an “anxiety level . . . and a vague feeling of uneasiness.”<sup>39</sup> Rice, however, took the optimistic view despite the unease which she felt clouded the artists books community. She wrote:

As a medium based on a format that is a staple of mass culture but that can be adapted for artistic purposes, artists’ books have now and will always have this tension between the popular and the elitist inherent in their nature. The tension is not a liability—it may, in fact, be their strength. What we are perceiving as a conflict may actually be what makes these books so relevant for our age; what we are perceiving as a paradox may be what makes it possible for book works to successfully explore the paradoxes inherent in our era. It may well be that it is just this tension that makes artists’ books a truly modern medium . . . if our aim is to expand the potential communicative power of the book and re-evaluate the . . . content that book works . . . contain . . . we must exploit . . . the possibilities inherent in artists’ books’ unique position in the cultural network. The tension inherent in the medium must be recognized and understood; it must, in the creation, distribution, exhibition, and criticism of artists books, be perceived self-consciously.<sup>40</sup>

While Rice was clear about the social and political paradoxes, Drucker introduced an aesthetic incongruity. The book, as art, “represents the democratization of the

39. Shelly Rice, “Parallel Lives: Artists’ Books and Photography.” *Afterimage* 13, no. 4 (November 1985): 6.

40. *Ibid.*: 7.

fine art commodity”<sup>41</sup> which accommodates the consumption or experience of objects with high aesthetic qualities. This experience is derived from a “relatively low-priced luxury commodity, valuable in a culture predicated on mass production and consumption.”<sup>42</sup> Drucker’s defense lay in her distinctions between the art object and the craft object: the former, subject to a personal aesthetic vision, the latter, she felt, prone to no aesthetics:

the book may serve the purpose of articulating a particular esthetic vision in a way unique to it as a medium. Specifically, it allows for the production of a ‘text’ which is not circumscribed by the limits of a literary work, but which includes all of the various features of the book: its materials, its imagery, its literary substance, and most importantly, its function as the manipulation of a vision which could not take other forms and function as a fully self-reflexive, self-conscious art.<sup>43</sup>

An example illustrating the contradictions inherent in the tension between the privileged object and the democratic object “a choice for potential populism,”<sup>44</sup> is a work by Tom Phillips, *A Humument*. Phillips took a Victorian novel, *A Human Document* by W. H. Mallock, and covered each page with images, leaving certain words or phrases exposed, to form a new narrative. In 1984 the unique book

41. Johanna Drucker, “Iliad and the Book as a Form of Art.” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts 1875–1945* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 36.

42. *Ibid.*: 37.

43. *Ibid.*: 38.

44. Lippard, “Doubled Over”: 2–5.



was valued at £20,000.<sup>45</sup> Phillips published a limited edition of the work in his workshop, the Tetrad Press, each copy valued at £500.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, it was published and sold as a mass-market trade book. “Thames and Hudson is going to bring it out as an ordinary book, at about \$30. And at that point it becomes democratic.”<sup>47</sup>

The offering of an inexpensive work, as a guise to the original, to a mass audience completely negates the art experience to that very audience. It is naive to believe a trade published version of *A Humument* in any way offers the same aesthetic experience, pleasure, and meaning, as the original unique version. Similarly, the limited edition copies provide a different situation and aesthetic experience to either the original or the trade edition. Rather than opening up, or exposing one to the experience of art, the Thames and Hudson version reduces the experience; it does, however, create a different one and should be seen in this light, rather than the overly romanticized defense. In

45. Vincent Katz, “Interview with Tom Phillips.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* xv, no. 2 (May–June 1984): 47.

46. Published in ten volumes between 1971–1976. A limited edition *The Heart of A Humument* was published by Edition Hansjörg Mayer in 1985. The Thames and Hudson trade edition of *A Humument* was published in 1980, with a revised edition following in 1987. Huston Paschal, *Tom Phillips Works and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992: 290.

47. Vincent Katz, “Interview with Tom Phillips.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* xv, no. 2 (May–June 1984): 47. The book, *The Way We Live Now*, by Susan Sontag and illustrations by Howard Hodgkin is a similar example. It was published in a limited edition of 200 priced at £1,800; and a trade edition priced at £12.99. Reviewer Cathy Courtney noted the poor quality of the colors in the printing of the trade edition: “the cheaper version is at least a means of gaining wider ownership for the book.” *Art Monthly* 146 (May 1991): 27.

the same way a reproduction of a painting in a monograph in no way replicates the experience of standing before an original canvas.

If the democratic process means to offer the experience of art to as wide an audience as possible by providing the cheapest possible work, it is a confining, limiting, and, a weak apology for a system it proposes to undermine where *privileged objects*<sup>48</sup> exist for the wealthy, whilst the *democratic object* is offered to the populous at large.<sup>49</sup>

The desire for *unprivileged objects* was both aesthetic and political, what Hansson called an “act of defiance”<sup>50</sup> to eliminate the aura of the privileged art object and its property of controlling limited possession, or exclusivity.

A second act of defiance, an explicitly political one, was the yearning to create an alternate distribution system for art, to emancipate the art object and the art experience. Lippard wrote what many paraphrased endlessly:

the artists’ book reflects no outside opinions and thus permits artists to circumvent the commercial gallery system as well as to avoid misrepresentation by critics and other middlepeople . . . it is considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience.<sup>51</sup>

48. Denis Donoghue, *The Arts Without Mystery*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983: 100.

49. The makers of books in the mid–90s are continuing this practice as the collectors have become interested in the books. There are many other examples described on the pages of *Print Collector’s Newsletter* and *Art Monthly* in their regular columns about artists books.

50. Joyce Hansson, “Artists’ Books—Illinois.” *New Art Examiner* 15, no. 7 (March 1988): 47.

51. Lucy R. Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public.” *Art in America* 65, no. 1 (January–February 1977): 40.

The 'alternate system' was essentially an American issue. Schwarz described the metaphor of the alternative space as a fiction.<sup>52</sup> European publishers and galleries had already been promoting books by artists; the "book addressed the abiding issue of content in artistic practice and profited from the market's capacity for distribution to sound out public response."<sup>53</sup> The celebrated French publisher, François Di Do, established the imprint *Le Soleil Noir* in 1948; but it was not until the early 1960s that he 'published' works by artists with world-class reputations. The works, always signed and numbered, bridged the worlds of the unique book and the limited edition, or multiple. Artists like Duchamp, Giacometti, Matta, Vasarely, Magritte, Alechinsky, provided 'illustrations' for *Le Soleil Noir*.<sup>54</sup>

Phillpot believed librarians had a unique opportunity to participate in the establishment of an alternate arena in the dissemination of inexpensive art: "art librarians can, exceptionally, participate in the dissemination . . . rather than . . . documentation, with a clear conscience . . . making available the artwork in its primary state."<sup>55</sup>

*New Yorker* art critic, Calvin Tomkins, commented on the distribution of artists books. It "has taken place . . .

52. Dieter Schwarz, *Lawrence Weiner Books 1968–1989: Catalogue Raisonné*. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 1989: 121. A limited edition of 25 copies of the title had been published with an original drawing, signed and numbered.

53. *Ibid.*

54. François Di Do, "Book-Objects." *Multiples*. Catalogue to exhibition (8 May–15 June 1974). Berlin: Neuen Berliner Kunstvereins, 1974: 190–204.

55. Clive Phillpot, "Artists' Books and Book Art." *Art Library Manual: A Guide to Resources and Practice*, edited by Philip Pacey. New York: Bowker, 1977: 356.

outside the gallery and museum circuit . . . the artist's book movement is still largely underground, and untainted by big money or market pressures."<sup>56</sup> Princenthal pointed out how the artists book looks "contentiously back at a superseded art establishment."<sup>57</sup>

The need for an alternate system grew out of the failure to find a place in the existing commercial art world; this too became a *leit motif* in the debate. Circumvention of the commercial art world was not only desirable, it was one of the objectives. Paradoxically, the lack of interest by the commercial galleries was replaced by a newly-found interest from the museum and library.

The creation of an alternate system meant creating a new means of exhibiting and distributing artists books, and, in some ways, creating its own market for its own products. For the most part, this scenario was idealistic; DeAk and Robinson were one of the few to recognize this and the contradictions inherent in the realities, right from the start.<sup>58</sup> They were also the first to recognize where the ultimate market for inexpensive artists books would lie: "the educational market . . . developing a unified distribution program."<sup>59</sup> As for the fallacy of 'decentralization' they recognized that artists books "perpetuate the same cultural centers and artistic hegemony as the non-'alternatives.'"<sup>60</sup>

56. Calvin Tomkins, "The Art World: Artists' Books, Art Books, and Books as Art." *The New Yorker* (25 January 1982): 74.

57. Nancy Princenthal, "Recent Artists' Books, or How to Invest \$100 in Artists' Books Published Since 1980." *Print Collector's Newsletter* xv, no. 2 (May-June 1984): 52.

58. Edit DeAk and Walter Robinson, "Printed Matter and Artists' Books." *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal* 13 (January-February 1977): 29.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

*Printed Matter, Franklin Furnace, Art Metropole, Other Books and So* were established, among others, to offer places for exhibiting, archiving and the selling of, artists books. Ironically, the metaphor of alternate spaces for artists books was a misconception: there existed no opposing venues. Lack of interest was the driving force behind the opening of these establishments. They became the solution to the problem of distribution of “source materials in a format which could encourage their distribution through traditional channels, however untraditional their contents or implications.”<sup>61</sup> Franklin Furnace always acted as a true archive from the start; principally by donation, though it did purchase examples which were of “historically important work.”<sup>62</sup> Part of its mission was to “catalog and conserve . . . what artists actually produced in the 60s and 70s . . . for research.”<sup>63</sup> The collection was eventually acquired by the library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The problems of distribution facing artists books in search of an audience are similar to those of the fine book world. A small number of fine-press publishers distribute to a finite number of collectors, private and institutional. Virtually all of this is carried out via mail either by a prospectus of a new work—itself an established practice which goes back centuries—or by a catalogue, also an established method. In either case, the marketing of a limited-interest product, with little, if any, resource, prevails.

61. Dick Higgins, “The Something Else Press.” *New Lazarus Review* (1979): 27.

62. Editorial, *Flue* (September 1980). New York: Franklin Furnace, 1980: [1].

63. *Ibid.*

Occasionally, a major trade publisher will pick up and market an artists book,<sup>64</sup> or even, publish an artists book themselves. In a conference panel discussion of 1982, marketing coordinator for the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Leta Stathacos, spoke out against the poor efforts of the makers of artists books, criticizing artists for their indifference to sales and success. The efforts spent in the creation of most books, she felt, far exceeded the search for a broader audience.<sup>65</sup>

Braun put it a little more strongly: distribution failed because artists failed to understand the commercial world, or that they simply refused to bend.<sup>66</sup> Guest, however, defended the position of artists books existing outside of a commercial world: “they are not commercially viable simply because they defy the expectations of a mass market by presenting avant-garde information.”<sup>67</sup> However, this was no explicit reason for failure, as the Conceptualists discovered; they, as beacons of an avant-garde, quickly became absorbed, exhibited and sold by the establishment.

The metaphor of the alternate spaces evolved into the consideration of the artists book as a portable gallery, a place to present ideas about art, later, original art. Snyder

64. *A Humument* by Tom Phillips was published by Thames and Hudson in 1980. The popular *Griffin and Sabine* trilogy by Nick Bantock was published by Chronicle Books in 1991. Abbeville Press published *Love Letters*, and Doubleday published *The Hat Book*. In 1995 Chronicle Books published Tim Ely's *The Flight Into Egypt*; in 1997 Chronicle Books published Susan King's *Treading the Maze*.

65. The comments were taken by Judith Hoffberg and published in “Making Book in Philadelphia: Bookworks/82.” *Umbrella* 5, no. 5 (November 1982): 110.

66. Barbara Braun, “Reaching for an Audience.” *Publishers Weekly* 224, no. 17 (21 October 1983): 29.

67. Tim Guest, *Artists' Books: "Pictures and Illustrators."* Catalogue to exhibition (March 1983). Tokyo: Gallery Lunani, 1983: 13.

quoted Malraux from *Museum without Walls*,<sup>68</sup> and the phrase became a metaphor for a world-wide distribution system, the exploitation of the mail system for the easy dissemination of art.<sup>69</sup> The artist Ray Johnson is credited as the first user of the mail service to disseminate his art; he began in the 1950s.<sup>70</sup>

Hugo envisioned an entire system growing out of Malraux's museum without walls:

in retrospect it seems almost predictable that by the 1970s hundreds of artists would be engaged in the production of inexpensive books, journals, postcards, etc., distributed directly through the mail, and that a support system would have sprouted up of shops, archives, critics, exhibitions, catalogues, anthologies and bibliographies.<sup>71</sup>

Carrión was one of the very few to ask what the true rewards of an alternate system were. He saw the changes as simply a substitution of one set of players for another,

68. Janice Snyder, *International Artists' Books Show*. Catalogue to exhibition (17 January–15 February 1981). Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago Library, 1981: 10. Malraux's words were: "A museum without walls has been opened to us, and it will carry infinitely farther that limited revelation of the world of art which the real museums offer us with their walls: In answer to their appeal, the plastic arts have produced their printing press."

69. Joan Hugo, "Museum without Walls." Catalogue to exhibition *Artwords and Bookworks: An International Exhibition of Recent Artists' Books and Ephemera* (28 February–30 March 1978). Los Angeles: Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1978: [4–6].

70. Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks, "The Page as Alternative Space—1950 to 1969." *Flue* (December 1980): 7.

71. *Ibid.*: 5.

without the rewards. “The . . . misunderstanding is the basis for . . . optimism—that books would allow artists to liberate themselves from galleries and art critics . . . what for? To fall into the hands of publishers and book critics!”<sup>72</sup>

Huginin, early in the debate, expressed the same sentiments and recognized a major hurdle, “books are capable of the same exploitation that a Pollock canvas is subject to. Someone has to produce the books and someone has to promote them. A gallery and bookstore perform the same function.”<sup>73</sup> Phillipot uttered the same cry, in a conference in 1985: “why would anyone want to subvert dealers? The book trade is as commercial as the gallery world . . . subversion is just another idea about artists’ books invented by critics.”<sup>74</sup>

By 1981, the issue of alternatives to the establishment were moot; the National Endowment for the Arts granted its first awards for the creation of artists books. If dissemination was still a problem, artists could now compete for money to support the production of books. A government body was now giving recognition to a discipline of work; part of the establishment was not only giving recognition; it was rewarding the few at the expense of the many.<sup>75</sup>

72. Ulises Carrión, “Bookworks Revisited.” *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distributors, 1980: 64.

73. James Huginin, “Introduction.” *The Dumb Ox* 4 (Spring 1977): 3.

74. Quoted by David Trend, “At the Margins: Artists’ Books in the 80’s.” *Afterimage* 13, no. 1/2 (Summer 1985): 3.

75. Lorraine Kenny, “On Artists’ Book Publishing.” *Afterimage* 12, no. 8 (March 1985): 3.



## READING THE BOOK

“In the new art,” wrote Ulises Carrión, “every book requires a different reading.”<sup>1</sup> This new art will create “specific reading conditions.”<sup>2</sup> Carrión was writing about a new kind of activity, insisting that for a complete and accurate reading of the new kind of book it was vital to understand the book as “a structure, identifying its elements and understanding their function.”<sup>3</sup>

These new kinds of books were to instill in readers a new consciousness about books which Carrión felt had been neglected. This idea was cherished by many. However, in Carrión’s case, his message was intended for a literary audience but it migrated to visual artists and bookmakers.

Carrión wanted readers to be aware of the complete form and structure of the book, a marriage of the external form and an internal text. Drucker described this as a self-consciousness about the book, “which interrogates the conceptual or material form of a book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities.”<sup>4</sup>

1. Ulises Carrión, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distribution, 1980: 20.

2. *Ibid.*: 21.

3. *Ibid.*: 20.

4. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995: 3.

Also vital for the success of a new kind of reading was “the informed viewer, who has to determine the extent to which a book work makes integral use of the specific features of the form.”<sup>5</sup> The key ingredient was active participation by the reader; the

compelling quality of artists’ books is the way in which they call attention to the specific character of a book’s identity while they embody the expressive complexity of the book as a communicative form. . . . To a great extent, the material constraints of the codex . . . are decisions about how to use the self-conscious awareness of the finite limitations of page: openings, turnings and sequence are all manipulated through decisions about layout, material choices concerning paper, ink, collaged or accrued elements, and binding structures. Artists’ books take advantage of the efficiencies of the codex . . . to contain considerable quantities of information . . . in a workable form . . . the best artists’ books are those which interrogate production and content so dynamically that such distinctions are moot.<sup>6</sup>

While bookmakers were demanding a reading on their terms, “in order to be able to engage fully with the content embedded in each book,”<sup>7</sup> meaning was firmly embedded within the “relationship of human beings to objects.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Scott recognized the inherent contradiction of creating a new method of reading. If each book required a new manner

5. *Ibid.*: 9.

6. *Ibid.*: 359.

7. Clive Phillpot, “Reading Artists’ Books.” *The Arts of the Book*. Philadelphia: University of the Arts, 1988: 7.

8. Dieter Schwarz, *Lawrence Weiner Books 1968–1989: Catalogue Raisonné*. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 1989: 143.

of reading, it “threatens to relegate the artists’ book to esoteric status.”<sup>9</sup>

A new mode of reading was deliberately sought after because artists books were no longer viewed as ordinary books, no longer containers of information. The codex form was becoming an ignominious object despite the long success of the codex book in literate society. In the West, readers are accustomed to reading left to right: a word-by-word, line-by-line, page-following-page convention.

Most writing, according to Phillpot, is “just one long line of words or phrases”<sup>10</sup> and conventional reading follows that long line from beginning to end. Exploring the new ways in which artists books have “expanded our notion of the process of reading a book,”<sup>11</sup> Phillpot differentiated between two kinds of reading: linear reading and random reading. He sub-divided these into retinal and tactile reading. The former dominates the traditional reading experience; the latter refers to the sculptural qualities of books, which require both hand and eye for the full experience.<sup>12</sup> Phillpot did, however, make a distinction for poetry, whose reading is comparable to the reading of artists books, wherein juxtapositions of ‘images’ or ‘ideas’ occur “instantly ... disrupting the linear reading process ... meaning ... is the product of ... connections from point to point.”<sup>13</sup>

The creation of a non-sequentiality in a text was a difficult feat, but it was highly desirable. Most observers frowned

9. Joanna Scott, “Life is a Book.” *Afterimage* 14, no. 9 (April 1987): 18.

10. Clive Phillpot, “Reading Artists’ Books.” *The Arts of the Book*. Philadelphia: University of the Arts, 1988: 5.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*: 7. Phillpot, further in the essay recognizes, that indeed, linear reading is at one extreme of the reading of artists books.

13. *Ibid.*

on this presupposed limitation, except when defending books which incorporated photography, i.e., books acting almost like cinema.

Kostelanetz disagreed; he did not find the page-by-page process a hindrance. Limitations existed in other media:

a book ... allows its reader random access, in contrast to audiotape and videotape, whose programmed sequences permit only linear access ... you can go from one page to another ... forwards and backwards, as quickly as you can from one page to the next.<sup>14</sup>

One of the few critics to defend the linearity of the codex form was Tallman. She defended the book's uniqueness and accepted it on its own terms, "terms on which it differs from a painting, is to accept exactly that sequentiality and temporality—not as a hindrance but as a tool."<sup>15</sup>

Princenthal described the difference in engagement between a painting—the untouchable art object, and a book—the tactile art object, this way:

Books are by nature expository and tend to delineate rather than compound ... they grant the reader a critical privilege: an untouchable art object establishes fixed ground for the observer's response ... a book can be manipulated at will. Its reader can ... presume an invitation to sympathize ... discouraged by other art forms, with the book's single or several speakers and, at the same time ... interpret them critically.<sup>16</sup>

14. Richard Kostelanetz, "On Book Art." *Leonardo* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 43–44.

15. Susan Tallman, "Counting Pretty Ponies." *Arts Magazine* 63, no. 7 (March 1989): 19–20.

16. Nancy Princenthal, "Recent Artists' Books, or How to Invest \$100

The choice for the book in the 1960s was double-edged: a convenient form to present art ideas in a primary state, and the most convenient vehicle for the conveyance of those ideas. Seth Siegelaub expressed this sentiment thus:

when art does not any longer depend upon its physical presence ... it ... becomes primary information ... the reproduction of conventional art in books or catalogues is necessarily secondary information... Books are a neutral source ... 'containers' of information ... a good way of getting information into the world... The idea of getting information to people quickly is a much different idea from getting a painting quickly.<sup>17</sup>

The ease by which a book existed as art made it ideal for an "analytical mode of discussion."<sup>18</sup> Whatever ideas were presented, they produced, for Celant, "arguments as pure information"<sup>19</sup> involving

the active mental participation of the reader ... communication substitutes for accidental elements ... a conscious ... perception by reading ... diversifies itself from mere sensations and æsthetic emotions.<sup>20</sup>

Meaning in painting and sculpture was predestined to the emotional: what was being communicated was an æsthetic. Communication in books, according to Celant, was purely

in Artists' Books Published Since 1980." *Print Collector's Newsletter* xv, no. 2 (May–June 1984): 53.

17. Interviewed by Ursula Meyer, published in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973: 124–126.

18. *Ibid.*: 5.

19. Germano Celant, *Book as Artwork 1960/72*. London: Nigel Greenwood, 1972: 11.

20. *Ibid.*

intellectual. It was a romantic assessment of much art prior to the 1950s and 1960s, and a simplistic assessment of the book, fully infused with its “intellectual habit.”<sup>21</sup>

A second issue concerning the reading of artists books was the serious and contentious matter of exhibiting and displaying of works in museums, galleries and libraries. Harvey asked paradoxically, “are artists’ books being misread?”<sup>22</sup> His answer noted the irony:

Here are objects produced for wide dissemination . . . being captured for exhibition, often placed under glass for security and protection, and frozen in a fragmentary view. They become something different then—artifacts, curiosities, objects more precious than their original intentions . . . artists struggle to make their books unique in character, but curators struggle to give them an aura they originally didn’t have.<sup>23</sup>

Drucker referred to these books as “auratic objects,”<sup>24</sup> books with mystical, precious or even fetishistic qualities; but the term also referred to the book as a historically-embedded object: embodiment of learning, symbol of wealth, icon of class, and evocation of culture.

The problems of display have always been regarded as obstacles for the complete experience of artists books. Phillpot, reviewing an exhibition of the book *Chinese*

21. Susi Bloch, quoted by Diane Kelder, “Artists’ Books.” *Art in America* 62 (January–February 1974): 112.

22. Donald E. Harvey, “Are Artists’ Books Being Misread?” *Dialogue, Ohio’s Artists’ Books Journal* 1, no. 1 (November–December 1979): 35. Betsy Davids echoed the same frustrations in 1995, “Artist Statements.” *Artweek* 26, no. 1 (January 1995): 21.

23. *Ibid.*: 21.

24. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995: 93.

*Whispers*, criticized the hanging of its pages on a wall, stating that the exhibition had “effectively destroyed the work, since it is dependent on the book form.”<sup>25</sup>

In an early exhibition in Los Angeles, some of the books had been placed behind glass cases, conferring on them a special status.<sup>26</sup> Frank felt that exhibiting them inside a case was a confinement “in some anaerobic chamber.”<sup>27</sup>

Hoffberg recognized that the storing away of artists books was contrary to the original intentions of artists, and reasoned it was “the type of audience, or the liability insurance, or previous experiences which have educated the curators.”<sup>28</sup> A review of a 1981 exhibition noted “the precious California collection is exhibited under glass and so cannot be read.”<sup>29</sup> And a reviewer of an exhibition in Philadelphia lamented upon “the frustrations of seeing books exhibited under glass as precious objects.”<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the real need to protect works on display, it remains, nonetheless, “vexing to be limited to seeing a single pair of pages in a book.”<sup>31</sup> The frustrations inherent in limited access was always a dilemma for the reading of artists books.

25. Clive Phillpot, “Telfer Stokes & Helen Douglas.” *Studio International* 189 (March 1976): 209.

26. Susan C. Larson, “A Booklover’s Dream.” *Artnews* 77, no. 5 (May 1978): 144.

27. Interviewed by Jacqueline Brody, “Peter Frank: A Case for Marginal Collectors.” *Print Collector’s Newsletter* IX, no. 2 (March–April 1978): 44.

28. Judith Hoffberg, “Two Surveys of Artists’ Books: A Medium Comes of Age.” *Artscene* 11, no. 4 (December 1991): 19.

29. Mathew Kangas, “Reading Room for Artists’ Books.” *Artweek* 12, no. 12 (28 March 1981): 4.

30. Ann Jarmusch, “Book Objects: Jeffrey Fuller Fine Art.” *Artnews* 81, no. 10 (December 1982): 130.

31. Neill Herring, “Re-Reading the Boundless Book: Art and Language Rewrite the Twenty-First Century.” *Art Papers* 19, no. 1 (January–February 1995): 51.

Kelley asked sardonically, “will the stares of the curious . . . then constitute a new kind of reading?”<sup>32</sup> The frustration remains a concern today.

A considerable amount of ink acknowledged the book as the principal information carrier. In 1976, Francis and Attwood pointed out “recent technological innovations in storing and distributing information have not replaced the book as a primary means of communication.”<sup>33</sup> Computers, when these comments were made, were in their infancy.

There was, in retrospect, the irony that artists books were created during a period of almost hysterical commentary over the demise of the book. It was an exquisite paradox. The book, because of emerging technology, was considered dead, or on its path toward obsolescence.<sup>34</sup> The most significant effect of the computer on artists books was the freeing of obligations and limitations; the book was “relieved . . . of its informational responsibilities.”<sup>35</sup>

The challenge to the hegemony of the book as ideal information medium was taking place when interest in artists books was increasing. The credo espoused, along with the death of the book, was that the computer would do to books

32. Jeff Kelley, “California Bookworks: The Last Five Years.” Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design.” *Artforum* xxii, no. 10 (June 1994): 97. In noting the provision of white gloves, Kelly felt as if he were in a “petting zoo.”

33. Richard Francis and Martin Attwood, *Artists' Books*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976: 13.

34. Raymond Kurzweil, “The Future of Libraries Part 2: The End of Books.” *Library Journal* 117, no. 3 (15 February 1992): 140–141. Kurzweil argued that books still have hegemony over computers because of superior display qualities; but once this has been solved books and the use of paper will end.

35. Gerald Lange, “The Book of the Twenty-First Century.” *Coranto* 24 (1988): 32.



what the printing press did to manuscripts. Instead, the computer relieved information of its singular dimension.

Lange, aware of the effects of technology on books, spoke affectionately about the place for the book:

Suspensions abound that the book may indeed have come round full circle. The manuscript book of the Middle Ages was revered for its religious significance, for its rarity and its singular perfection. Perhaps too, the book of the twenty-first century, in its hand crafted beauty, will be revered. The book more than any other object produced by humans requires for its operation the complete interaction and participation of the 'end user'; it appeals to the hand, to the eye, to the mind, and to the heart.<sup>36</sup>

The audience for artists books was both mythical and real, existing side by side. The mythical audience was as unlimited as the ideal artists book, as large as the unlimited edition of a book. It was an audience which was intimidated by galleries and museums, which could experience art almost anywhere, and which could purchase very inexpensive art. For example, Smith remarked on the powers of the mass-produced book: it can "reach a greater audience than an exhibit. It is not relegated to a one month spread of time or a single event. A book can be seen anywhere, at any time, in any situation, and can be returned to."<sup>37</sup>

There were those, however, who took a more pragmatic view, "contrary to their intent, artists' books reach very few outside the art world. Until the artists' book is more

36. Ibid.: 29.

37. Keith A. Smith, *Book 95: Structure of the Visual Book*. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1984: 9.

widely disseminated . . . it will be difficult to argue that art is anything other than . . . a function of the class in power.”<sup>38</sup>

Ironically, while many writers complained about the frustrations of creating new audiences, Carrión complained that “nowadays, the only trouble with artists’ books is that they have gained the attention of museums and collectors. The sabbath dance of the signed/numbered, limited first editions has begun.”<sup>39</sup> Lippard, echoing Carrión’s words, understood the dilemma: “interest by collectors will change them into *édition de luxe*.”<sup>40</sup> Medvedow acknowledged that they “circulate among the still small corner of the art world which in itself represents only a small percentage of readers.”<sup>41</sup> In a more dissenting tone, Pinkwas felt makers of artists books were principally making books for each other, “audiences . . . are still confined largely to art and design ‘ghettos.’”<sup>42</sup>

Selling artists books today is through specialized book sellers or by direct mail, a point made at the very beginning of the debate. Printed Matter continues to issue catalogues. This method of sale is not to by-pass the establishment. As Johnston stated, the “only way to really market artists’ books is to deal directly with the customers, . . . almost exclusively private collectors.”<sup>43</sup>

38. Tony Whitfield, “Vigilance: An Exhibition of Artists’ Books Exploring Strategies for Social Change.” *Artforum* 9, no. 11 (September 1980): 69.

39. Ulises Carrión, “Definitions.” *Art-Rite* 14 (Winter 1976–1977): 6.

40. Lucy R. Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public.” *Art in America* 65, no. 1 (January–February 1977): 41.

41. Jill Medvedow, “Introduction.” *What Are You Waiting For? An Exhibition of Artists’ Books*. Catalogue to exhibition (15 June–3 July 1984). Seattle: Nine One One Gallery, 1984: 52.

42. Stan Pinkwas, “The Book Transformed.” *ID: Magazine of International Design* 32 (January–February 1985): 67.

43. Quoted by Steven Lavoie, “Navigating the Marketplace.” *Artweek* 26, no. 1 (January 1995): 17–18.

It was Phillpot who, as early as 1977, correctly pointed to the main dissemination of artists books, “art librarians can . . . participate in the dissemination, rather than art documentation . . . purchasing and making available the artwork in its primary state.”<sup>44</sup> Dalberto agreed; she envisioned an opportunity for libraries “to become more than a repository for secondary texts about art and actually provide original art works.”<sup>45</sup> In 1984, Amy Hautt, one-time assistant director of Printed Matter, when asked who her primary audience was, answered, “artists, collectors, and, most of all, libraries.”<sup>46</sup> By 1985, Edwina Leggett, of Califia Books in San Francisco, uttered the same cry, “eighty to ninety percent . . . are librarians.”<sup>47</sup>

The audience for art is small; furthermore, the audience for contemporary art is smaller still. The audience for artists books is confined to the narrowest of fields. Alexander, in 1994, pointed out how artists books continue to be “collected by libraries, and museums, displayed by museums and galleries; . . . taught in colleges and universities as well as in community education programs.”<sup>48</sup>

44. Clive Phillpot, “Artists’ Books and Book Art.” *Art Library Manual: A Guide to Resources and Practice*, edited by Philip Pacey. New York: Bowker, 1977: 356.

45. Janet Dalberto, “Collecting Artists’ Books.” *Drexel Library Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 79.

46. Anne Edgar, “A Conversation with Printed Matter.” *Afterimage* (January 1985): 9–11.

47. Interviewed by Meredith Tromble, “A Conversation with Marie Dern, Book Artist, Publisher and Curator, and Edwina Leggett, Artists’ Book Dealer.” *Artweek* 26, no. 1 (January 1995): 19.

48. Charles Alexander, “Introduction.” *Art & Language: Re-Reading the Boundless Book*. Exhibition and symposium. Minneapolis: Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995: 9. Libraries are a major arena for display, particularly, art libraries.

## S U C C E S S E S   A N D / O R   F A I L U R E S

The debate on artists books began immediately with all the stated issues and then went nowhere with them. There was a tremendous amount of repetition, and those few rare moments of insight, often cited at the very beginning, were neglected or ignored. Not until two decades passed did the debate really find direction, particularly with the writings of Johanna Drucker.

Nancy Princenthal, writing in 1986, felt very optimistic about the future of artists books, though she was unclear about what exactly she was referring to. Nevertheless her comments continue to apply a decade later:

The making—and buying, and analyzing—of artists' books is ... a perverse choice. The difficult, even obscure, terms of the discipline conspire against it... But whether or not it is to be relieved of its textural burdens in the century to come, the form of printed matter called the artist's book ... looks to have a future.<sup>1</sup>

The perversity of the making, buying and analyzing of artists books did not prevent the accumulation of mounds of writing about the subject. What, then, is its future?

1. Nancy Princenthal, Review of *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*. *Print Collector's Newsletter* XVII, no. 1 (March–April 1986): 30.

Artists books are moving in two directions as we head to the end of the 20th century: the crafted object, and the artwork, both limited edition, and unique object. The relationship between the two has never been eradicated; attempts at dismissing the craft sensibility was the goal of a number of writers. And yet, the traditions of the craft influenced the traditions of the non-craft, even during repudiations of the former. The debate was weakest in its critical and theoretical base.

Expectations for bringing together past and present are high, probably unrealistic: “it is difficult to reconcile ... the relationship between the historical and the contemporary ... we assume that they will fit ... together in an influence/precedents relationship.”<sup>2</sup>

Johanna Drucker’s efforts are bringing the debate into the present. Theory is developing through her discussions of books, much in the way of Celant, two decades earlier. Yet, the greatest of hurdles remains: a language in which a dialogue can truly succeed.

Some of the most sanguine and eleemosynary words on the debate have been written by Karen Wirth, in a short paper, *Re-Reading the Boundless Book*.<sup>3</sup> Wirth was searching for a model to write reviews about artists books and she fell on her teaching experience as a guide. She set out to observe, think, then act; first for herself, then for others.

2. Susan Dodge Peters, “Do You Read Me?” *Afterimage* 13, no. 10 (May 1986): 17. The point was made in a review of the exhibition *Beyond Words: The Art of the Book* (31 January–30 March 1986) Rochester, N.Y., the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1986.

3. The paper was presented at the symposium, *Art and Language: Re-Reading the Boundless Book*, held 8–10 April 1994 at Minnesota Center for Book Arts in Minneapolis. The essay was published the following year in a publication with a similar title.

Wirth saw the problems and solutions as follows:

- 1) that there was a seemingly endless variety of books, hence a seemingly endless variety of definitions; and many contexts for discussion; and that there are, indeed, an infinite number of approaches to a book;
- 2) that artists books are seen as hybrids, not quite art as most observers understand, and not quite books as shelved in a bookstore; the artworld and art press really only express interest in the established names of commercial galleries;
- 3) that museum exhibitions are usually relegated to the library;
- 4) that issues raised by the book itself are rarely addressed; much reviewing of books “concentrates on global generalizations of a material or medium rather than the specific ideas and methods of the work”;<sup>4</sup>
- 5) that meaning is not fixed in material or history or format. The fluid movement of ideas from the maker through the object and its message to the reader, requires open-minded engagement on both ends. We who are artists and writers continue to make and expand the book; we who are readers and viewers are asked to look anew, to re-read the boundless book; and we who are critics and teachers can challenge expectations and act as guides through an ever-changing ... territory.<sup>5</sup>

4. Karen Wirth, “Re-Reading the Boundless Book.” *Talking the Boundless Book: Art, Language & the Book Arts*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995: 140.

5. *Ibid.*: 144.

Wirth asked, rhetorically, who is the best commentator for artists books?

The longest participant in the debate, Dick Higgins, spoke up for the inter-relationships which exist in a completely satisfactory understanding of artists books. There exists the book itself; there exists the experience of the book; there exists the experience of the viewer of the book. In each case, an interaction occurs, perhaps only a little, nevertheless, it exists. And each element is unique, from execution to perception.<sup>6</sup> Observers need to be aware of all the interactions to fully describe the experience of the artists book.

The artists book, more than anything else, has revitalized the long tradition of bookmaking. It was once the artist, now the bookmaker, who pushed the boundaries of a tradition. Abt describes thus: “if they differ from previous makers of books it is because they have succeeded in exploiting the expressive potential of the book’s form in ways never before imagined.”<sup>7</sup>

Lange sees the interest in artists books linked to a resurgence of the fine press book movement of the 1980s as more and more books “cross the well-worn paths of traditional fine press printer/bookmakers.”<sup>8</sup> It is his conviction that “the infusion of the energy and impulse of the artists’ book with the sense of craft . . . may be the book of the twenty-first century.”<sup>9</sup> Abt proclaimed artists books

6. Dick Higgins, “Hermeneutics and the Book Arts.” *Art & Language: Re-Reading the Boundless Book*. Exhibition and symposium. Minneapolis: Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995: 16–17.

7. Jeffrey Abt, “The Book Made Art.” Catalogue to exhibition *The Book Made Art* (February–April 1986). Chicago: University of Chicago Library, 1986: 7.

8. Gerald Lange. “The Book of the Twentieth-First Century.” *Coranto* 24 (1988): 28.

9. *Ibid.*

to be the “next major step in the evolution of the book.”<sup>10</sup>

Johnston spoke strongly in favour of turning “your back on the traditions. But in order to do that, you should know the traditions, you should understand them, you should master them before you flout them.”<sup>11</sup>

Eaton felt that “artists will continue to find in the book format an object of infinite possibilities.”<sup>12</sup> Smith explains his motivations in using the book for exploring ideas:

It was discovered that they could best be explored or expressed by their embodiment in the book form, which has all the suitable qualities for this purpose. In this one object we find a multiplicity of planes permitting the sequentiality and serial groupings of text and/or images. The parts of a book have variable manipulative potential. As an object it has a mobility and flexibility between its various parts which allow changes in its shape. . . . The kinds of mechanisms which control the mobility of the book may be varied, and the various treatments of the planar surfaces which are possible present an unrivaled medium in which literary, visual, spatial and temporal concepts may be explored and conveyed. Book formats can embrace narrative, concrete or abstract content.<sup>13</sup>

10. Abt: 7.

11. Alastair Johnston interviewed by Sandra Kirshenbaum, “Making Books in Northern California.” *Artweek* 22, no. 21 (6 June 1991): 21.

12. Timothy A. Eaton, “Books as Art: An Introduction.” Catalogue to exhibition *Books as Art* (30 August–6 October 1991). Boca Raton: Museum of Art, 1991: 7.

13. Philip Smith, “Understanding the Physical Book-Arts.” *The Private Library* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 54.



But this interest, this ‘craft literacy’ was felt by Butler to be simply an exaggeration of the “the social impact of . . . manual features of reading . . . counterproductive in the information age.”<sup>14</sup>

There are also contradictions inherent in a literate reading of artists books, “where a legible text is presented, literate people are going to read it . . . if only out of habit . . . the conjoining of an image and a text will inevitably imply that one is a response to the other . . . because we continue to expect correlation.”<sup>15</sup>

One effect artists books have had in the art world has been to influence the design of exhibition publications. Museums are willing “to be more experimental in their approach to publications . . . working closely with the artist . . . a practice seen more often in Europe than in America.”<sup>16</sup> Reid described such a move by ambitious galleries who “have become specialty publishers, producing scholarly writings, inventive curatorial projects and artist/gallery collaborations that function as both object and documentary.”<sup>17</sup>

Interest in cheap books never materialized. The democratic artform, defined by Drucker as affordability, not accessibility,<sup>18</sup> was inhibited by slow acceptance in the artworld. “The problems of distribution . . . makes them less profitable as an artworld commodity.”<sup>19</sup>

14. Frances Butler quoted from Jeff Kelley, “California Bookworks: The Last Five Years.” *Artforum* 22, no. 10 (Summer 1984): 96.

15. Susan Tallman, “Prints and Editions.” *Arts Magazine* 94, no. 7 (March 1990): 18.

16. Quoted by Alan Jones, “A Book Store Moves to SoHo.” *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 4 (December 1989): 14.

17. Calvin Reid, “On the Books: Contemporary Galleries Introduce the Catalogue as Art.” *Art & Auction* XII, no. 10 (May 1990): 70–71.

18. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995: 72.

19. *Ibid.*: 83.

The realities of producing and marketing inexpensive books, as opposed to their higher-priced equivalents are related by Johnston, a bookmaker:

I published a lot of books under ten dollars. And people would ignore them . . . at that level, you're trying to compete with the trade publishers. You also have distribution problems . . . there was no point in putting up all that money and doing a thousand copies of the book if I only sold two hundred . . . why not spend the same amount of money and do fewer copies and charge a more realistic price for it.<sup>20</sup>

The activities within institutions and organizations at the close of the 20th century in the world of artists books is very similar to the fine book world. Workshops and centers offering classes in all aspects of book making are strong and are spread right across the country, many supported by grants of one kind or another;<sup>21</sup> bookmaking is offered in art schools, colleges and universities. After two decades,

20. Kirshenbaum: 21.

21. Drucker indicates the fiscal reality of making books: "the most radical contradiction of the original myth of the artist's book as a democratic multiple resides in the fact that capital input is generally needed to produce a low-cost product . . . the 'democratic' multiple has to be highly subsidized to be affordable." "Artists' Books and the Cultural Status of the Book." *Journal of Communication* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 39. And Zimmermann points out, "many wonderful artists' books have seen the light of day thanks solely to grants from NYFA, NYSCA and the NEA and other funding agencies." *The Journal of Artists' Books* 4 (Fall 1995): 9. The main retail outlet in New York, Printed Matter, is supported by sales of work by "blue chip SoHo artists." Brad Freeman, "JAB Journeys Before the Glue Factory Theorizing Production." *The Journal of Artists' Books* 3 (Spring 1995): 26.

libraries, now the principal collecting agencies of artists books are becoming “more open to daring formats.”<sup>22</sup>

One issue which unites all is that artists books continue to exist “without links to mainstream art institutions.”<sup>23</sup> This issue excites Drucker who considers this position still “too advantageous in that it allows much activity to proliferate without hampering codification and hierarchization.”<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the marginalization of artists books was considered by Zweig to be “book art’s own fault . . . book art fails to participate fully in the ongoing discourse of contemporary art.”<sup>25</sup> Her advice: “draw sharper distinctions within the fields. It’s time for fine press books and artists’ books to part company.”<sup>26</sup>

After two decades there exists an oligarchy inside the world of artists books: reviewers, bookmakers, essayists, panelists.

The London art journal, *Art Monthly*, devotes most of its column inches to reviews of exhibitions, interviews, reviews of books and assorted news items. The greatest problem discussed is not definition; rather, it is the problem

22. Interview by Meredith Tromble, “A Conversation with Marie Dern, Book Artist, Publisher and Curator, and Edwina Leggett, Artists’ Book Dealer.” *Artweek* 26, no. 1 (January 1995): 19.

23. Johanna Drucker, “Artists’ Books and the Cultural Status of the Book.” *Journal of Communication* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 20.

24. *Ibid.*: 21. Its drawback, as Drucker acknowledges, is repetition of ideas.

25. Janet Zweig, “All Dressed Up with No Place to Go: The Failure of Artists’ Books.” *The Journal of Artists’ Books* 4 (Fall 1995): 2.

26. *Ibid.*: 3. Johanna Drucker agrees in the same Journal issue: “to move artists’ books out of the artsy-craftsy ghetto into which they have drifted and to insert artists’ books into contemporary arts . . . take seriously the terms on which books are conceptualized as an artistic form.” *The Journal of Artists’ Books* 4 (Fall 1995): 1.

of poor distribution of books. What does persist is an oligarchy of names, a kind of alternate establishment: Telfer Stokes, Jake Wilson, Ian and Mathew Tyson, d'Arbeloff, Ken Campbell, Ron King, Julia Farrer and John Christie. In the United States, a similar oligarchy of names occur. Drucker also noticed an emphasis in reviews "almost exclusively on books by mainstream artists . . . symptomatic of the current position of artists' books."<sup>27</sup>

One issue the debate must resolve is how to discuss the unique object, considered sculpture, from the edition. Spies revealed an area ignored by all: a history of books which fit easily into the artists books genre of the last quarter of the 20th-century. Many examples serve as precedents; for example, a late fifteenth-century Chansonnier made in the shape of a heart. Spies has many 20th-century examples to draw on.<sup>28</sup>

The end of the book is not yet in sight,<sup>29</sup> despite the hyperbole of the 'information age.' Eisenstein showed how such exclamations were readily heard in the nineteenth-century by critics of the newspaper press.<sup>30</sup>

More and more information will be stored in electronic form and transmitted electronically; faster speeds and ever-increasing capacities of computers will accelerate this process

27. Johanna Drucker, "Critical Necessities." *The Journal of Artists' Books* 4 (Fall 1995): 5.

28. Werner Spies, "Take and Devour: The Book as Object." *Focus on Art*. New York: Rizzoli, 1982: 241.

29. Robert Coover pondered over the end of the traditional novel, given over to writing in the non-linear world of hypertext which could never make sense in a printed paper form. His essay was entitled "The End of Books." *The New York Times Book Review* (21 June 1992): 22-25.

30. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "The End of the Book?" *The American Scholar* 64 (Autumn 1995): 549.

and newer ways of exploiting these abilities will result in new areas of digitized information. Clearly the greatest advantage of electronic information over the printed book is currency, or 'real time.' What is missing from most assessments of the end of the book is human psychological needs. Paulapuro speaks confidently that "electronic media will never replace print as a form of communication; augment it, yes; complement it, certainly; replace it—never."<sup>31</sup>

Others remark on the role of the artists book as the "rare book of the future ... [where] pages of some of these books would stand as notable artworks on their own [and] creates a sense of luxury and extravagance."<sup>32</sup> For Eaton the "conventional book as a vessel of knowledge is doomed ... will information be exclusively disseminated electronically?"<sup>33</sup> Charles Altschul, founder of New Overbrook Press, went a step further: "books of the future will be considered art objects. In the computer age literature will be available in other forms—TV, whatever."<sup>34</sup>

Almost a quarter of a century later, a definition remains unresolved; no alternate system to the art world was ever established; no new mass audience for art was created;

31. Hannu Paulapuro, "The Future of Paper in the Information Society." *The Electronic Library* 9, no. 3 (June 1991): 144. Steve Woodall agreed; rather than regarding artists books and the computer as competing media, he felt the two "share many commonalities." *Artweek* 26, no. 1 (January 1995): 26.

32. Frank Cebulski, "Books in an Expanded Context." *Artweek* 12, no. 22 (4 July 1981): 6.

33. Timothy A. Eaton, "Books as Art: An Introduction." Catalogue to exhibition *Books as Art* (30 August–6 October 1991). Boca Raton: Museum of Art, 1991: 7.

34. "Books, Plain and Fancy—Supply and Demand." *Print Collector's Newsletter* xv, no. 2 (May–June 1984): 61.

and no one has really explained what a new reading of artists books tells.

Artists books did bring about small changes; some welcomed, and some, by the parameters of the early discussions, disdained. There is, for example, a renewed interest in the book, but not where the debate would care for: the craft object, and the deluxe livre d'artiste. A new spurt of classes at college and community level in bookmaking testify to an expanded interest, yet, once again, students are interested in the codex form and want to learn the practical aspects of bookmaking in all areas. And lastly, libraries are collecting artists books with a keen interest, though few will dare explain what they are.

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Sources for information about artists books come from the standard indexing tools for the fine arts (paper and electronic forms), printed bibliographies and checklists, book dealer catalogues, newsletters and journals, exhibition catalogues and a single collected anthology.

*Art Index* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company) began indexing artists books in its November 1973–October 1974 volume and is available in electronic form from data beginning 1984. The *Répertoire de la littérature de l'art*, RILA, (Santa Monica: J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Art Information Program) began indexing artists books in 1975 and continued under its new publication title, *Bibliography of the History of Art*. It is available in electronic form from data beginning 1990. *ARTbibliographies Modern*, ABM, (Santa Barbara: ABC–Clio, Inc.) began indexing artists books in 1973 using the term, *Book, Art of the*, as its subject classification; ABM adopted the term, artists' books, in 1988.<sup>1</sup> An electronic version of ABM is available providing data beginning 1974. In all three cases the form, artists' books, with the apostrophe, is used.

1. The 1988 issue of *ARTbibliographies Modern* brought major changes in response to its subscribers and advisers. The editor, Tony Sloggett, noted the necessity of changing certain subject headings to "bring them into line with the conventions of other services and with generally accepted professional practice." Introduction, *ARTbibliographies Modern* 19, no. 1 (1988).

The single largest printed source for artists books is the *Annual Bibliography of Modern Art* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.) for the Library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The annual begins in 1986, and is complete to 1994. It is an astonishing index to the Library's collection of artists books, especially catalogues to world-wide exhibitions and the books themselves and praise must be given to its former librarian, Clive Phillpot, a major player in the debate about artists books, who acquired the Franklin Furnace Archive for the Museum Library.

The contribution which journals and newsletters gave is varied; they naturally reflect their principal readership. Two journals are devoted to artists books: *Umbrella*,<sup>2</sup> which began publishing in 1978; and *The Journal of Artists' Books*, a new title which began in 1995 with much participation by Johanna Drucker. A London publication, *Art Monthly*, began a regular column on artists books in 1985, written by Cathy Courtney, a key figure in the world of artists books in Great Britain. The journal does have a British bias, but this does not detract from its contributions. A number of publications lasted only a few issues, sometimes only a single publication: *Artery, Flue*—the newsletter of the Franklin Furnace in New York, and *The Dumb Ox*. However, the source for scholarly essays, articles and reviews has been *Print Collectors' Newsletter*, which began publishing works on artists books with the review essay by Nancy Tousley in 1974. The newsletter published reviews of books for fourteen years when it began a regular featured column, *Artists' Book Beat* by Nancy Princenthal. The column was included in a broad-range section, *News of the Print World*, until,

2. *Umbrella* does, at times, include short pieces about mail art, and occasionally, the work of Fine Press publishers.



in its last issue for 1988, the newsletter made the column a stand-alone feature.<sup>3</sup>

The newsletters and journals provide a mix of news and interviews, criticism and analysis, and reviews of exhibitions and books. The regular columnists avoid demonstrative roles in the debate; the issues are hinted at, through passing remarks, or in reviews. The key issues are avoided: the underlining assumption is that the subject is understood from the start.

3. As of September/October 1996, the newsletter is published under its new title, *On Paper: The Journal of Prints, Drawings and Photography*.

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