

Michael Snow, *Cover to Cover* (two openings), 1975.

Systemic Books by Artists

by Robert C. Morgan

THE PLAY ON SYSTEMS in artists' books is a mediumistic as well as a conceptual concern. Attention is focused upon the book as object—a direct manifestation derived from a given set of parameters. Systems set forth in artists' books develop from artists' concepts which, in turn, evolve from a confluence of images, ideas, pre-determined constructs, and linguistic propositions. Not all are explicit systems. Some books are more visual, concerned with defining the book as a structure; others are more conceptual, concerned primarily with the content of ideas.

Systemic books by artists became most ostensible during the conceptual movement in North America, Europe, and eventually in Latin America. Much of this activity was concurrent with the media explosion of the 1960s heralded in the writings of Marshall McLuhan. While certainly not the sole influence, McLuhan's theories suggested possibilities for processing ideas and images in the form of "information" which could then be transmitted bereft of traditional art objects. Consequently, artists' books—and systemic books, in particular—became a convenient form of presentation for these conceptual concerns. However, such bookmaking practices constituted only one fraction of the avant-garde activity during the late 1960s, and therefore, may be viewed less from a normative art historical perspective, and more through a descriptive analysis based on the intention of individual artists.

Sometimes a book serves as a container for a system of ideas expressed outside the book itself as, for example, in an installation or performance work. In such an instance, the book's emphasis is generally less about the medium of bookmaking and is more given to the process of documentation within a systemic format which may echo the sys-

temic content of the event being documented.

Some conceptual artists who produced books in the late 1960s used the paginal format as a readily available means to present their ideas, often to disseminate information in a re-contextualized manner. But there were others who saw the book more in terms of a structure, a means for presenting original work, emphasizing systems designed specifically to be viewed through the turning of pages. Such artists included Sol LeWitt, Stanley Brouwn, Lawrence Weiner, Hanne Darboven, the Bechers, and Peter Downsbrough.

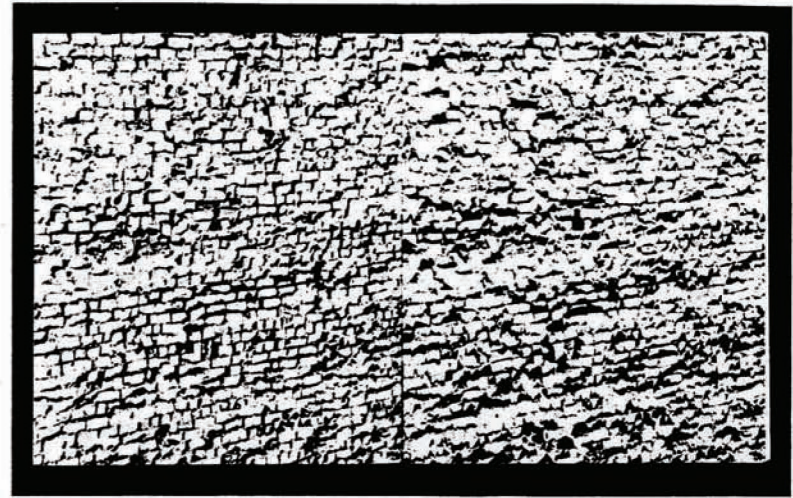
It was not until the seventies, a period when the formalist grip on American art began to dissipate in favor of something called "pluralism," that the artist's book began to find acceptance by a wider art audience. This occurred largely through the publishing and organizational efforts of individuals such as Dick Higgins, Bern Porter, Judith Hoffberg, Martha Wilson, Sol LeWitt, Lucy Lippard, Peter Frank, Germano Celant, and Kasper König.

Artists' books, which had been an underground establishment for several years, suddenly appeared in great numbers from areas outside of New York, Paris, Milan, Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, Cologne, and other major art centers. Books by artists were seen as an alternative to the gallery network, a way of by-passing the fixed strategies of the marketplace and giving one's ideas publicity without compromise. This assumed, of course, that the artist took upon herself or himself the task of either self-publishing or finding a publisher or financial backer who understood the concept. The latter task was often quite arduous.

One must remember, however, that the term "book" was being used by artists more loosely than it had been used by commercial publishers. Instead of relying upon expensive typesetting techniques, corrected margins, and sewn bindings, many artists were printing their books with quick and inexpensive reproduction methods, such as copy machines and instant offset presses. Many of these "books" were stapled or wire-bound; some consisted of loose-leaf pages placed in envelopes, or configurations presenting only the most perfunctory evidence of what a book might be.

Conceptual artists naturally gravitated toward the book medium, usually with a highly simplified approach. Sol LeWitt, whose systemic books are perhaps the best-known publications to emerge directly out of conceptual art, clearly fits into the reductive formalism of the 1960s in the New York avant-garde. His original contribution to conceptualism is the presentation of a dialectical space between a language paradigm and its concretization as visual form. The latter evidence may take the form of three-dimensional cubic structures, wall drawings, and—of primary concern here—his artist's books.

LeWitt's use of systems is explicit. In other words, the focus of his



Sol LeWitt, *Brick Wall*, 1977.

books is upon how the language paradigm works in relation to the visual system, the latter being either serial or sequential. In that LeWitt's books are predicated on the syntax of his language paradigms (which often read as titles, captions, or instructions), his visual configurations operate as translations which, in turn, become modular structures systematically evolving through the temporal occasion of experiencing a book.¹ The experience of viewing these works is an abstract one. They function as reproductions or explorations of a structural idea in order to derive its essential meaning. LeWitt's books present themselves as literal facts.

The Location of Lines is a somewhat complex schemata presented as a logical progression of intersecting lines. The reader/viewer is expected to decipher some rather dense logic in written form which corresponds to the placement of the lines. The dialectic between linguistic structure and visual manifestation is repeated on each double page spread. The logic begins at an elemental level, showing the placement of a single line, and gradually develops in complexity as new elements are added to each subsequent proposition. For some readers, there is a tendency to become less involved with the phenomenon of LeWitt's concept and more focused (or unfocused) on the sheer tedium of the logic.

In *Geometric Figures and Color*, the pages are sectioned into three equally visible, color-coded sections: The first reads "On Red"—the second, "On Yellow"—and the third, "On Blue." In each section,

there are six basic shapes, one to a page, which include a circle, a square, a triangle, a rectangle, a trapezoid, and a parallelogram. Each geometric figure advances through the color sections in a given order; thus, the viewer may apprehend the color relationship of the figure-to-ground interaction based on memory and logic as to what figures will appear in relation to the color system. It is the hue that may startle the viewer's expectations—even though the grid-sequence of the color/figure relationships is clearly stated at the beginning of each section.

The seriality used in LeWitt's *Geometric Color and Figures* is not involved with value changes, but with shifting expectancies. The permutations are clear, the rules are set. All variables have been delimited. The system is investigated thoroughly within its given parameters.

In 1977, LeWitt produced two books of photographs, entitled *Brick Wall* and *Photogrids*. In contrast to the abstract linear progressions used in earlier books, these compendia of photo-images emphasize qualities of implicit structure through use of the camera. In terms of concept, there is little relationship between the two books. *Brick Wall* is a sequence of thirty black and white photographs taken of a section of wall. Each image extends to the edges of a single page. The concept of the book appears very close to that of Monet's painterly studies of the facade of the Rouen Cathedral. In each case, the viewer must "read" the tones of light shifting across the facade of a richly textured surface. At the outset of *Brick Wall*, the surface is flooded with intense light; by the conclusion, the wall is encased in a barely discernible density of dark tones. The system is essentially a photographic one, a comment perhaps on the medium; yet it has more to do with the effects of light—as does Impressionism—than with the actual physical structure of the wall. What appears as a simple book is transformed into one of ultimate mystery and equivocal meaning, raising complex cognitive and phenomenological issues about the conditions of light and time and about the nature of how we perceive reality.

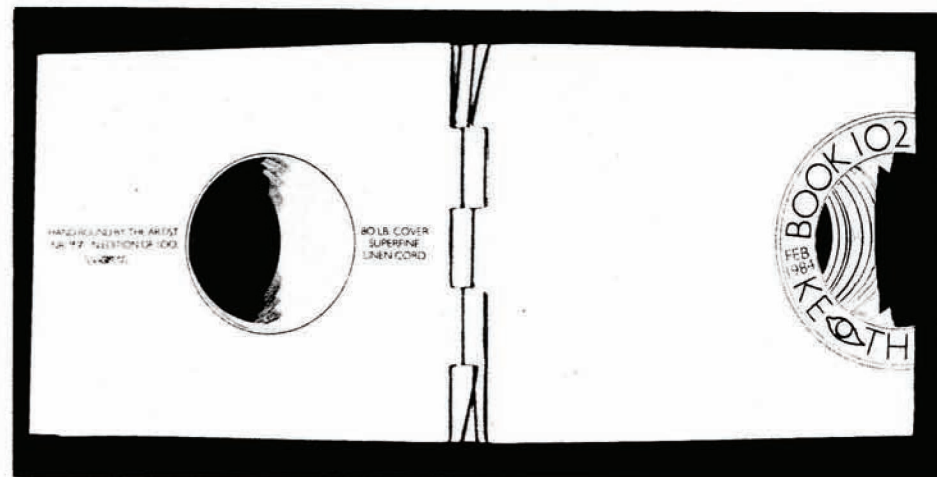
Photogrids is considerably less adventuresome. It is a larger size book which reads as an assemblage of square format Rollei snapshots. The order of each nine-unit page emphasizes the proverbial grid within which LeWitt loosely categorizes various "found grids," such as manhole covers and window frames, into a generalized statement about urban visual semiotics. *Photogrids*, in retrospect, is the public component of LeWitt's later *Autobiography*, a more successful book in which the artist's concrete personalized view of details in his studio environment approaches a narrative structure.

In each of LeWitt's books, the use of systems plays heavily in the content; the outcome can be pleasurable in the sense that listening to music can be pleasurable. But sometimes LeWitt gets too heavy-handed in his methodology. His best books are those in which the visual signs flow

easily and work in parallel consort to the clarity of his language; in fact, where explicit language is mitigated in favor of conceptual meaning. The reduction of language becomes meaningful as it challenges our understanding of the visual parameters and their systemic interrelatedness.

At this juncture I would like to suggest that there are two kinds of systems at work in those books which hold forth artists' concepts: *narrative* and *concrete*. Narrative systems work in relation to a theme which may be either literary or visual. They tend to unfold sequentially, but not necessarily according to a serial logic. Concrete systems, on the other hand, tend toward abstract logic and seriality. Concrete systems tell no story; rather they present an interrelationship of elements as formal design. The organization of a concrete system is more tightly regimented; hence, the book reads more in terms of an explicit modularity. Concrete systems are about literal facts; narrative systems tend toward literary illusions. A concrete system is contained by the literalness of what it is; a narrative system implies other levels of meaning behind what is there. Narrative systems do not require linearity; concrete systems often do.

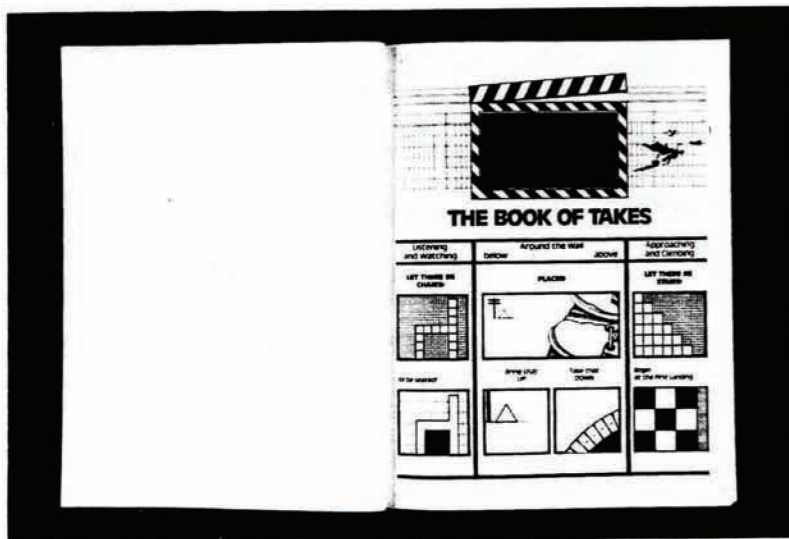
Although he has made many one-of-a-kind books dealing with narrative systems, some of Keith Smith's most fascinating books operate precisely as concrete systems.² Smith began doing "no-picture books" in the early 1970s. He numbers his books in consecutive order. *Book 30* and *Book 102* both incorporate the use of simulated dye-cut circles.



Keith Smith, *Book 102*, 1984.

Book 97 is a leather-bound one-of-a-kind book consisting of cut-out grids. In each case, Smith has used the literal space from the patterned cuts revealed on each of the pages. There is a sense of physicality in that the book operates as a kind of sculptural unit. In *Book 102*, for example, the content can be literally seen and understood opened-up in a display case. Each page is a serialized cut-out circle which forms a tunnel of vision through the book. In an editioned work, entitled *Book 91*, Smith has extended the sculptural meaning of the book by using cords that provide tension points between the various pages. His is concerned with the light and sound effects as one engages in the function of "moving through" the book page by page. The concept, in fact, echoes that of Rauschenberg's *White Panels* (1952), a painting in which the viewer sees his or her shadow against the modular surface. Smith's *Book 91* invites the viewer to see the linear configuration of the cords as shadows playing against the pages of the book. The concreteness of these systems is in the fact that the significance of these books is totally literal. It is the reality of holding the book, seeing through it, turning the pages, that registers meaning.

A good example of a narrative system is Paul Zelevansky's *The Book of Takes*, a non-linear pictographic novel. The layout of *The Book of Takes* is basically tripartite. Images and text can be read in three vertical columns. The reader can choose to read both vertically and horizon-

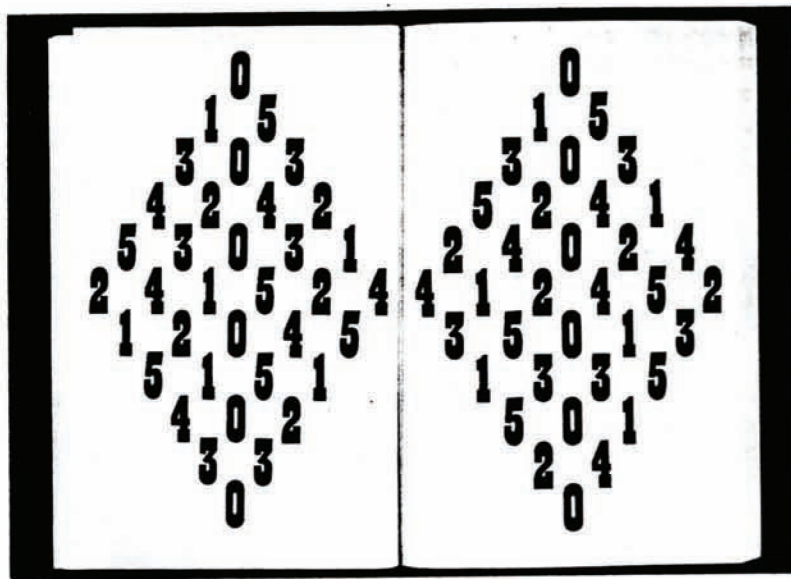


Paul Zelevansky, *The Book of Takes*, 1976.

tally, moving forwards and backwards in a network of semiotic disclosures and abrupt shifts in syntax. Zelevansky's book attempts to provide the reader with a grammatical system in both visual and typographical terms. The images are entirely drawn and therefore cohere as subtle ideogrammatic configurations. The content takes place largely in the region of Sinai and arbitrarily includes audience participation. A map is included as a separate element to indicate to the reader his or her location in respect to the action of the narrative.

When speaking of a system intrinsic to the structure of a visual book, this should not imply narration only in the classical sense. Artists' books tend not to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but rather function in terms of given sets of parameters which may operate either sequentially or thematically, sometimes both. When Ulises Carrión says that artists' books can be comprehended without necessarily viewing the entire book, he implies that the concept which supports the system is possessed with considerable weight.³ Although the truth of his statement is clearly exaggerated, the point is well taken; yet I would footnote Carrión's assertion by saying that the kind of book system to which he refers is most often within the context of the concrete, not the narrative system. In Zelevansky's book, for example, a concrete system is employed, but the resolution is entirely through the narrative structure. Without attending to the content of the narrative, the system could be easily oversimplified, even misunderstood.

Some of Richard Kostelanetz's books, such as *Constructs*, *Exhaustive Parallel Intervals*, and *Numbers, Poems, and Stories*, are excellent examples of concrete systems. The implication of the latter work, published as a newsprint tabloid in 1976, suggests that the concreteness of Kostelanetz's numerical paradigms has somehow taken a leap into narrative, that the parameters of these magic number constructs are not unrelated to the work of formalist fiction writers. However, upon examining the constructs in *Exhaustive Parallel Intervals*, in which the dimensions of a diamond-shaped paradigm increase gradually using integers 0 through 5 in serial progression, one realizes how indelible the classical structure appears. The ordering is linear and not at all unpredictable. In this case, the play upon an abstract system has replaced the literary content of a random theme—the condition of randomness being more characteristic of narration than its concrete counterpart. *Exhaustive Parallel Intervals* is concerned with language games as numerical constructs that do not so much defy former categories of narration as give them a reduced classical appearance. The structure itself is not revolutionary, rather the content has shifted from the literary representation to the literal presentation. Kostelanetz may be suggesting that concrete systems can be interpreted, maybe recontextualized, as narrative fiction in order to signify that concrete systems can be read as well as de-



Richard Kostelanetz, *Exhaustive Parallel Intervals*, 1979.
Collection of the Rochester Institute of Technology.

ciphered in purely mathematical terms. Regardless of the interpretation, the system at work is still a concrete one, and it is the concreteness of Kostelanetz's systemic ventures which offers the real intrigue. How these systems are read or interpreted may have more to do with the frame of mind one brings to the occasion of receivership, and less to do with the premise that narration is simply another form of concrete reasoning logically expressed through abstract models of seriality.

Other artists' books may appear "systemic" by maintaining a marginal conceptual concern, while relying more explicitly on loosely collaged styles of narration, closer perhaps to experimental cinema than to conventional fiction or confessional writing. In Kevin Osborn's *Real Lush*, the obsession with printed overlays gives way to a frenzied juxtaposition which keeps a narrative distance between any thematic concept and the employment of accessible printing techniques. This gap is reinforced continuously by what appears as a conscientious striving toward image glut. The density of information, appropriated and mixed, makes any concern for language seem irrelevant. Without some attempt at making visual language discernible, the vocabulary turns to morass. When the morass pretends to issue narrative meaning apart from its rigorous attempt to dissolve formal intention, the work is likely to become what e.e. cummings once termed "an uncomic non-book."

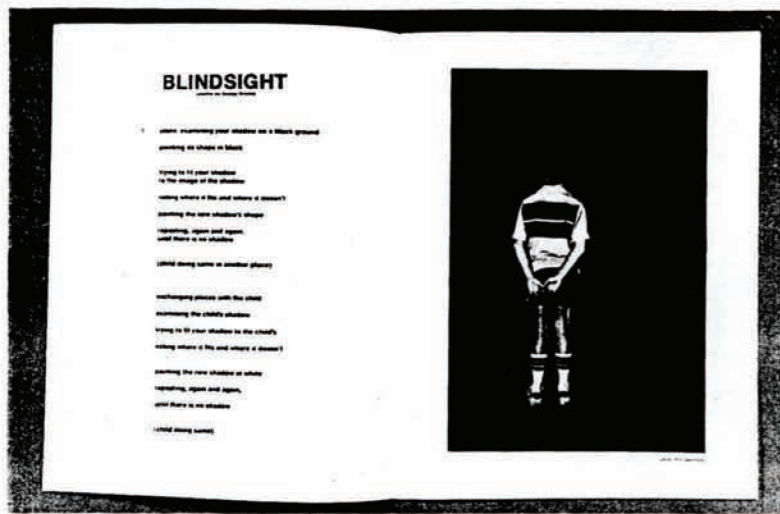
Real Lush, quite simply, is recontextualized "cheap thrills" given a modestly sophisticated facelift within the genre of artists' books. Osborn has demonstrated how an utter plethora of printing techniques bereft of a clearly designated conceptual underpinning may approach a kind of hallucinogenic solipsism. Ironically, *Real Lush* also approaches academic formalism in the process of testing those formal limits. The emphasis is upon visual effects which can exist independently from a specific narrative theme.

Another work which employs a narrative system, though within a performance medium, is Carolee Schneemann's notecard assembly, entitled *ABC—We Print Anything—In the Cards*.⁴ Intended as a set of cue cards for reading aloud, *ABC* involves a tri-color coding system in which intimate remarks from three different sources have been printed. The cards are used as a ploy in order to structure the meaning of their confessional content. While the passages reflect actual feelings, they offer little disclosure as to the real psychological motivation behind them. The effect is ultimately one of narcissism, zestfully achieved by means of a non-linear narrative technique. The use of a narrative system in Schneemann's *ABC* does not rely upon a conventional narrative structure. The content of the cards is discovered through the system employed, and like any system, the parameters are clearly contained, though not always clearly discernible.

In contrast, Martha Rosler's seminal feminist ideolog, *Service*, is conventional in formal terms, but revolutionary in terms of both context and content. The text is a series of three narrative accounts, each describing the working conditions of three women in the labor force. The tone of each narrative is confessional. The total message is one of sexual and economic exploitation. The book in itself does not carry an explicit systemic significance. However, the narrative points directly at the larger social/political/economic implications of the capitalist system which tends to consider such human services as expendible. *Service* is a book about systemic exploitation; it is through the narrative that the impact of the system begins to unfold and achieve significance.

Much of what has passed for systemic bookmaking is really more in the category of documentation; that is, the book itself merely serves as a vehicle or container by which to transport a concept geared towards another mode of delivery, namely, performance and installation works often involving music, video, dance, and multi-media.

Upon occasion, as in the "activity" manuals produced by Allan Kaprow throughout the 1970s, the line of distinction becomes tenuous. Although Kaprow's manuals appear to many as documentation of his performance works, they are, in fact, components for use within the context of the works themselves. One example would be the book, *Blindsight*, designed by an event performed at Wichita State Univer-



Allan Kaprow, *Blindsight*, 1979. Collection of Robert C. Morgan.

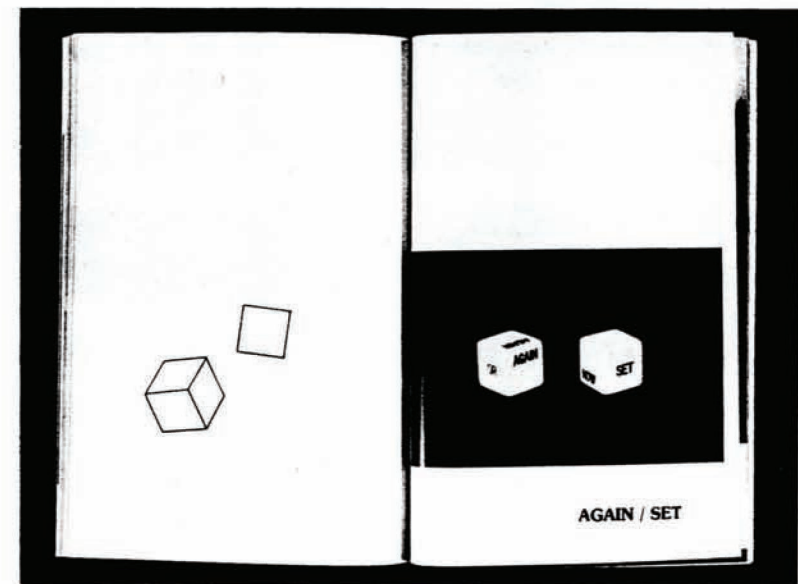
sity.⁵ The piece involved twelve children and twelve adults who paired off and drew their shadows in various configurations over one another on the wall. Although not published until after the event, the performance manual theoretically serves as an instruction guide or script for others to use in reconstructing the event. Incorporated into the manual, however, are documents from the original performance at Wichita, including photographs and statements by various participants.

The use of photography and photo-reproductive techniques by artists who do not consider themselves photographers by profession is a curious development in recent years which has found its way into the production of artists' books, magazine pages, catalogues, and tabloids. Two of Sol LeWitt's books have already been examined in this context. To some extent, Allan Kaprow is another artist who has frequently relied on photographs in order to clarify his intentions. Ed Ruscha is perhaps the most celebrated of book artists who has used photographs extensively. Much commentary has already been written on Ruscha's books, but because of their relationship to systems, one cannot ignore some mention of his work.⁶

In *Royal Road Test*, co-authored by Ruscha, Mason Williams, and Patrick Blackwell, documentary photographs and captions describe an event which occurred 122 miles southwest of Las Vegas, Nevada, on August twenty first, 1966. A Royal Typewriter was hurled out of a speeding Buick convertible traveling at ninety miles per hour. In the af-

termath, each part of the violently dismantled typewriter was fully documented, using photographs and captions, much like a police accident report. In another book, *Crackers*, a series of photographs describe another absurd incident in which a male performer (Larry Bell) makes a salad on a hotel bed and invites a woman to undress and recline in it. The protagonist then retires to his own hotel room to eat a box of crackers. In each book Ruscha is dealing with a narrative system based on fantasy in which he uses photographs in sequence. Given the straight documentary approach of most Ruscha books, these two are exceptional.

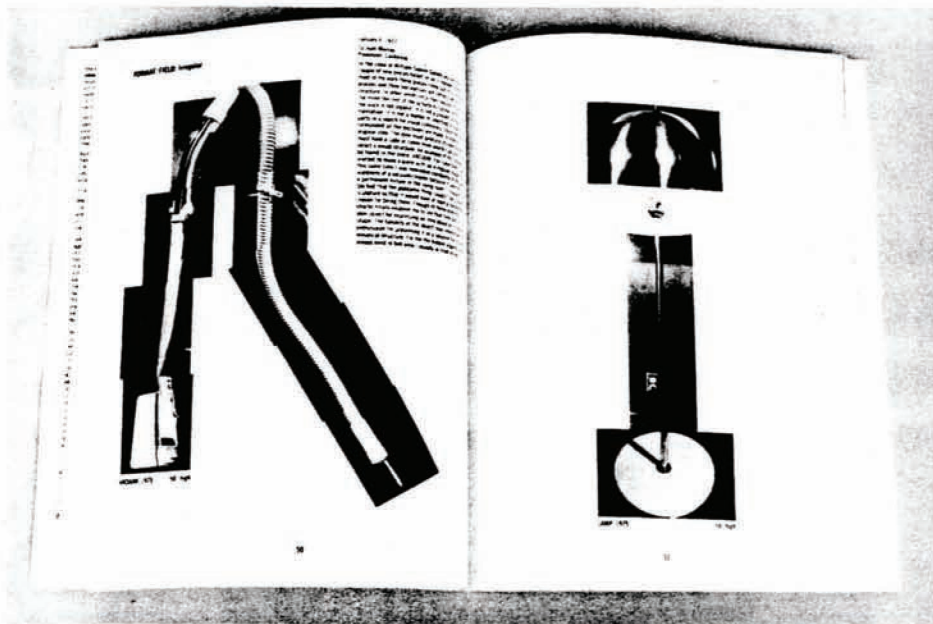
Another artist, Peter Downsbrough, uses two parallel vertical lines in a repetitive sequence, often in reference to photographs. One the cover of *In Front*, a photograph documents a sculpture made of two parallel vertical steel rods, one shorter than the other. The pages inside the book refer to the image on the cover, but also the book itself. Downsbrough is highly reductive in his imagery. He works with concrete systems in which the pages of the book are "marked" in repetition in order to reemphasize the position of the viewer's eye as it makes contact with the page. In the more recent publications, such as *In Passing*, photographs of dice are repeated along with drawings and text. Together they reveal a well developed systemic complexity which comments



Peter Downsbrough, *In Passing*. Collection of Robert C. Morgan, 1975.

metaphorically upon current power struggles in world politics.

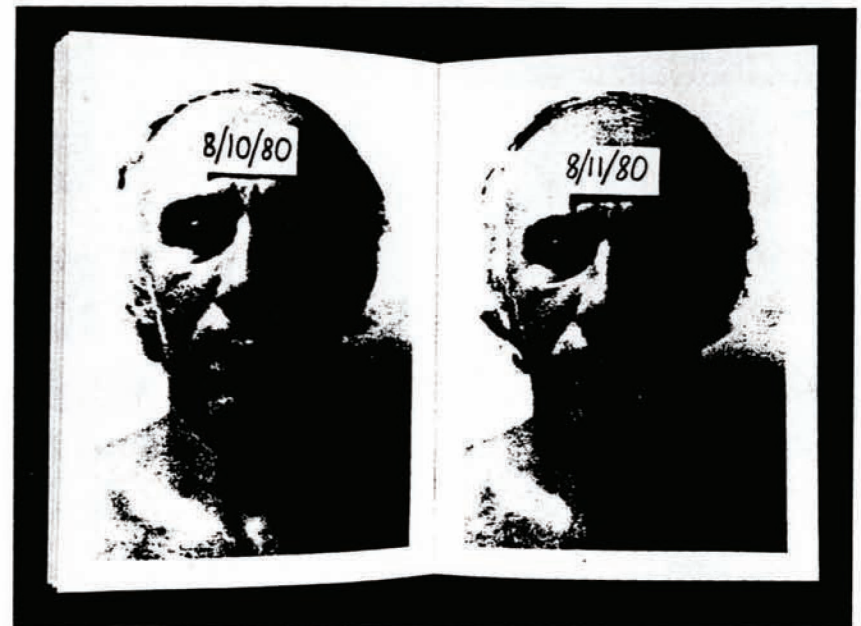
The NFS Press in San Francisco, coordinated by Lew Thomas and Donna-Lee Phillips, has produced a series of interesting compendia dealing with various issues related to photography and language. Thomas's own work, *Structural(ism) and Photography*, is essentially a catalogue of image-systems realized primarily through serial photography. Although the book functions like a catalogue, Thomas offers considerable insight into the temporal meaning of photographic imagery by way of a rigorous, nearly clinical documentation of mundane activities, such as closing a garage door or observing a sink fill up with water and then drain again. Thomas's approach is one of distancing himself from his subject matter, no matter how closely tied to the object or person he may be in real life. This allows the time of the action to progress through modularity, more or less, as a concrete system. Although there may be allusions to narrative in his work, there are no pure effects. Even so, the term "conceptual photography" used in his earlier work could be interpreted as a misnomer. Thomas's real contribution is his ability to take personal subject matter and distance its reading and therefore give it the function of objective language.



Lew Thomas, *Structuralism and Photography*, 1978.

The notion of using the camera to document a mundane activity as standard routine has been epitomized by the Soviet emigré artist, Vagrich Bakhchanyan. In *Diary (1-1-80—12-31-80)*, Bakhchanyan has confronted the camera each day for the duration of the year 1980. Each "self-portrait" shows the artist with the day's date attached to his forehead, thus recalling an affinity with the seminal date paintings by conceptualist On Kawara. At the outset of the year, Bakhchanyan is bald; by the completion of the year, he has long flowing hair. The photographs in *Diary* were instant offset, bound, and collated in an edition of 250 copies. Bakhchanyan's books reflect the ingenuity of an artist committed to the pleasure of art as a reflective activity. By giving emphasis to the distribution of ideas, the importance of material quality in the production of the work becomes less of an issue.

One outstanding example of a systemic narrative employing photographs is Michael Snow's *Cover to Cover*. Again, much has been said about Snow's "structural" films. The fact is that this Canadian artist has given equal energy to other media, including painting, sculpture, photography, music, installation works, and artists' books. To encounter the complexity of his book, *Cover to Cover*, is in some ways a cinematic



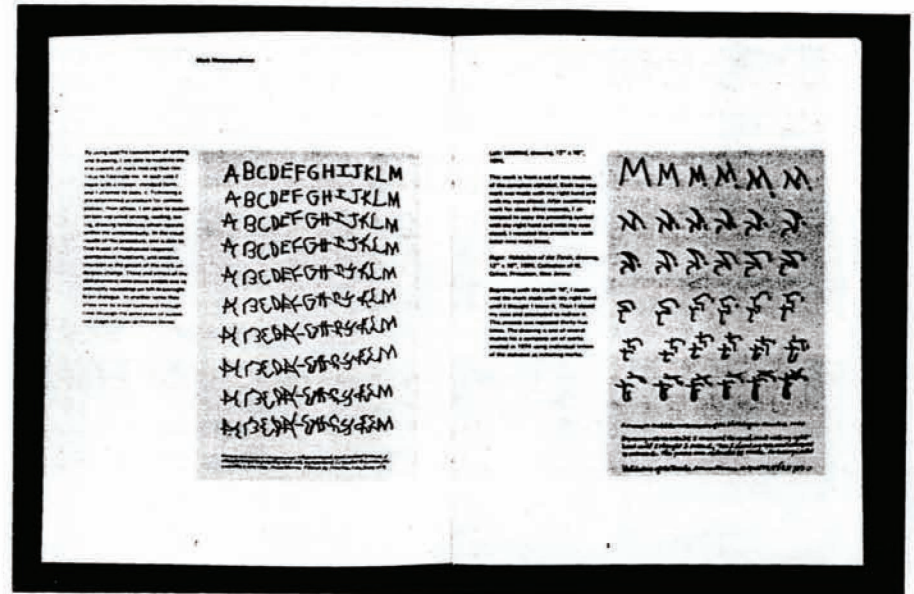
Vagrich Bakhchanyan, *Diary (1-1-80—12-31-80)*, 1981.

experience. In other ways, it may be compared to the architectural illusions found in some Spanish mosques, given the layering of spatial disorientations and sequential ambiguity that Snow has presented between the covers of a book. A primary concern, for Snow, is that photographic representation exists in its own space as it exists concurrently in a surrounding environmental space which has the potential to intercede upon one's perception of an image. On the front cover, a detail of a door is photographed. On the back cover, the reverse of what appears as the same door is an image of the door re-photographed. This is indicated by the presence of the artist's finger holding the image. Throughout the book, the viewer is confronted with forward and backward views of objects and events related to the artist's life as he goes from his house to his car to his gallery and back to his house again. What may appear as a firsthand representation of reality is suddenly twice removed as the artist's hand is used to cover an image, thereby confounding our expectations of what we are seeing and *how* we are seeing it. Michael Snow's *Cover to Cover* surpasses the purely visual element on one level by elevating our cognizance of photographic imagery toward a multi-leveled strata of narrative.

Systemic books do not have to comment upon the medium of book-making, although as previously indicated, many do. Two books by California computer analyst Aaron Marcus, entitled *Soft Where, Inc.*, published in 1975 and 1982 respectively, are diaristic accounts of his conceptual projects. In each volume, Marcus sets a system into motion and then proceeds to give a detailed narrative as to how the system resolves itself as it interacts with everyday situations. These works are technique oriented and deal with problems of communications and language.

One of the most entertaining entries, documented in Volume 2, is a project called "Light Line." In this piece, the artist attempts to establish communication with an ex-student who is about to become Queen Nur el Hussein of Jordan. The revelation of how security functions on an international scale, particularly in the Arab state, is both informative and illuminating.

The importance of *Soft Where, Inc.* is in the realization that advanced techniques in communication, without advanced attitudes about technology, has very little to offer human beings in the post-modern age. Formally speaking, *Soft Where, Inc.* functions as a series of narratives. The form is both diaristic and documentary. In each entry Marcus records the development of a specific work in progress. In addition to the narrative text, there are diagrams, charts, and photographs which assist the reader in re-constructing the artist's intentions for each piece. In doing so, Marcus successfully bridges the gap between the operation of a concrete system within a social context and an intimate narrative des-



Aaron Marcus, *Soft Where, Inc.* Collection of Robert C. Morgan.

cription of how it is happening.

This essay has been an attempt to explicate a variety of applications of systemic art to the artist's book. It has by no means been inclusive of the many excellent works available. In stating a theoretical position, the problem of selectivity is always eminent and therefore should not imply objective taste insofar as the issue of quality is concerned. Systemic books deal with systemic ideas; they need not imply a tautology—that such books are exclusively about the system of the book itself. However, this is clearly one criterion in dealing with the problem. Certainly another central criterion would be the distinction between concrete and narrative systems. Other criteria are the fact that technical manipulations in printing do not substitute for conceptual resolution, that most photography used within the context of systemic books is not always concerned primarily with photography as a fine art, and that where documentation is used as the intention for doing a book, the issue becomes one of how well the elements function within the context of the artist's system.