

when such books have been co-opted by commercial publishers and transformed into glossy, pricey products.

Needless to say, there are good artists' books and bad ones—from anyone's point of view. They have in common neither style nor content—only medium. (Economically determined strictures, as much as a fairly ubiquitous minimalist stylist bent, can be blamed for the tendency to the white, black, or gray cover with stark type that until recently was the trademark of the artist's book.) They are being made everywhere. Printed Matter's first ten books come out of Oregon, Pennsylvania, Illinois, California, and Massachusetts, as well as New York. They range from the hilarious to the bizarre, romantic, deadpan, decorative, scholarly, and autobiographical; from treatises to comic books. Their political possibilities are just beginning to be recognized too. One of the basic mistakes made by early proponents of conceptual art's "democratic" stance (myself included) was a confusion of the characteristics of the medium (cheap, portable, accessible) with those of the actual contents (all too often wildly self-indulgent or so highly specialized that they appeal only to an elite audience). Yet the most important aspect of artists' books is their adaptability as instruments for extension to a far broader public than that currently enjoyed by contemporary art. There is no reason why the increased outlets and popularity of artists' books cannot be used with an enlightenment hitherto foreign to the "high" arts. One day I'd like to see artists' books ensconced in supermarkets, drugstores, and airports and, not incidentally, to see artists able to profit economically from broad communication rather than from lack of it.

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A Critical Anthology & Sourcebook

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Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books

by Lucy R. Lippard

THE ARTIST'S BOOK is/was a great idea whose time has either not come, or come and gone. As a longtime supporter of and proselytizer for the genre (and co-founder of Printed Matter, the major nonprofit distributor), it pains me to say this. But all is not lost, just misplaced.

My carping could certainly be questioned. The National Endowment for the Arts finally gives grants and the Museum of Modern Art has a curator for artists' books; big publishers are picking up on some of the sure things; there are exhibitions and even occasionally reviews. A browse through Printed Matter can restore one's faith in the eternal inventiveness of visual artists. They seem to have thought of everything, from flipbooks (home movies) to flopbooks (made of fabric, like drool-proof babies' books), from severe neo-textbooks to scruffy rubberstamp and xerox anarchies, to slicknesses rivaling *Vogue*. Some are one-liners, and once you've got the punch line you have no urge to take it home and get punched out daily, but some truly tickle the Freudian funnybones. Some are luscious. You can picture pulling them out on a winter Sunday afternoon to fondle or chuckle over. I could list hundreds of artists' books I'm glad to see in the world.

Yet the real vision with which the phenomenon gained momentum in the mid-to-late sixties has not yet been fulfilled. It's still necessary to define an "artist's book" for any but a specialized audience. So—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—cinematic potential co-existing with double-spread stasis.

Artist and bookmaker Pat Steir once said she liked artists' books because they are "1. portable, 2. durable, 3. inexpensive, 4. intimate,

5. non-precious, 6. replicable, 7. historical, and 8. universal." (She was talking, as I am here, about mass-reproduced, potentially "democratic" works of art rather than about "one-of-a-kind" art objects in book form, or signed and numbered limited editions.)¹

Virtually all of the 2,000 artists' books in Printed Matter's illustrated mail-order catalogue and the 9,000 titles in Franklin Furnace's Artists' Book Archive are portable and replicable (though print runs vary drastically); most are durable and intimate; some are non-precious and inexpensive; very few are historical and universal, which may be a contradiction in terms anyway. However, they do all mark a genuine historical moment of dissatisfaction with art's outreach, a declaration of independence by artists who speak, publish, and at least try to distribute themselves, bypassing the system.

Artists' books have existed since early in the century but as a named phenomenon they surfaced with conceptual art in the sixties, part of a broad, if naive, quasi-political resistance to the extreme commodification of artworks and artists. Accessibility and some sort of function were an assumed part of their *raison d'être*. Still, despite sincere avowals of populist intent, there was little understanding of the fact that the accessibility of the cheap, portable form did not carry over to that of the contents—a basic problem in all of the avant-garde's tentative moves towards democratization in the sixties and early seventies. The New York art world was so locked into formal concerns (even those of us who spent a lot of time resisting them) that we failed to realize that, however neat the package, when the book was opened by a potential buyer from "the broader audience" and she or he was baffled, it went back on the rack.

In 1981, Carol Huebner, curator of a college book exhibition, announced enthusiastically, "An art form that has been accessible for years has finally found its audience."² It depends on what audience you're after. True, Printed Matter, Franklin Furnace, and others have successfully made artists' books available worldwide to collectors, museums, scholars, and other artists. At the same time, practitioner Mike Glier wrote a few years ago that the next step for artists' books was "to become politically effective and to communicate to a diverse audience." A few years and no giant step later, Glier is saying, "We're past the careful nurturing stage and into do or die competition with mass culture. If artists' books remain a novelty in the art world, they are a failure."

The fantasy is an artist's book at every supermarket checkout counter, or peddled on Fourteenth Street ("check it out"). The reality is that competing with mass culture comes dangerously close to imitating it, and can lead an artist to sacrifice precisely what made him or her choose art in the first place; and when "high art" tries to compete, it

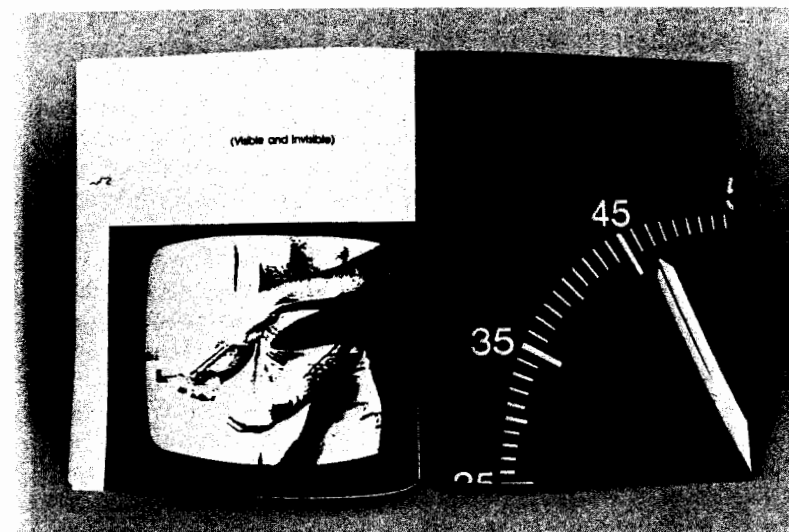
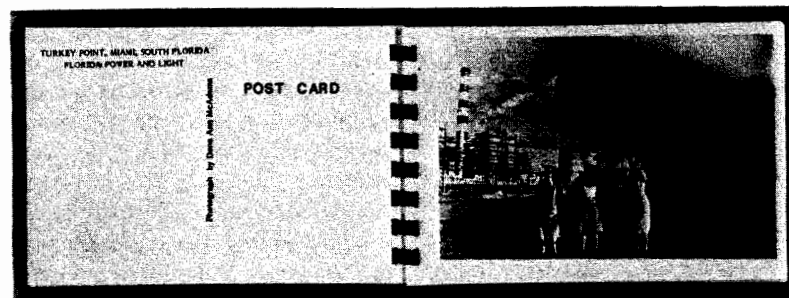
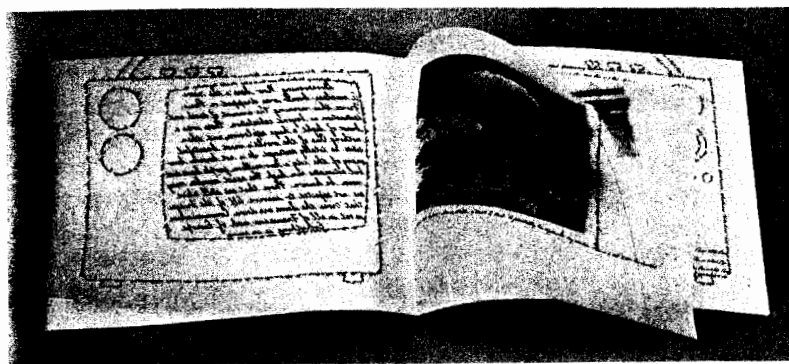
also has to deal with what's been happening all along on "lower" levels—comics, photo-novels, fanzines, as well as graphic design or so-called commercial art. An article I saw in an airline magazine was subheaded "Packaging sells products, and the designers of those critical marketing tools are more than merely artists." Author Bernie Ward described the packages as "thousands of individual little salespersons demanding, pleading, for your attention and dollars in the fierce competition of the supermarket." Many artists' books and comics look downright amateurish (and, though deliberately, not necessarily endearingly) next to the work of professionals not so highly regarded, but more highly paid than most "high" artists.

The central question revolves around function, and the role of art in general. How is the artist's book form special? At what point is it merely an ineffective and poorly distributed stepchild to big-time publishing, and at what point does it offer something (invention, criticism, alternative information) that the other media can't? Well, it is a quick and noncumbersome means of receiving information or stimuli. It should be popular in a society that perceives and experiences everything rapidly. (Even our president prefers to get his briefings in pictures.) I learned some of the little economics I know (don't test me) from an innovative non-artist's book published by the Institute for Labor Research and Development in which David Gordon's text is paralleled page by page by Howard Saunders's comic strip where a cast of characters live out the dilemmas posed by the theory. And the book accompanying Avis Lang Rosenberg's exhibition of feminist cartoons—*Pork Roast*—has probably raised more consciousness than most "high" feminist art.

In his recent book on pop culture as covert propaganda, *The Empire's Old Clothes*, Ariel Dorfman tells a revealing story about a woman in the Santiago slums who begged him not to deprive her of her photo-novellas: "Don't do that to us, *compañerito*, don't take my dreams away from me." After Allende was elected and the people in the *barrios* had taken hope, he met her again and she told him she no longer read "trash." "Now," she said, "We are dreaming reality."³

There *are* artists' books that present a reality rather than a fantasy, which gives access to ideas and information harder to come by in other forms, books that are serious works of reflection rather than unconsidered reflections. Janice Rogovin's *A Sense of Place/Tu Barrio* is a bilingual photobook subtitled "Jamaica Plain People and Where They Live." It includes brief, warmhearted texts by and about the subjects, from a working-class Massachusetts community. It is at once an appealing picture of what a neighborhood can be, a mini-sociology, "human interest" story, and a warning on the pending evils of gentrification.

Maybe Rogovin's book, like Wendy Ewald's moving *Appalachian*



Women: Three Generations—also photos and oral history, is a photography book, not an artist's book. The lines blur, especially when they confront the taboo against art that deals with "real world" issues. It's important that artists' books cross over and are integrated into that real world, but it's also important that without being bound by categories, they retain a certain identity of their own. Masao Gozu's *In New York* (Feb. 1971-Nov. 1980), a totally photographic book of wistful, full-frame images of people in inner city New York windows, is probably an artist's book because it is uncaptioned, unbordered, and invisibly titled (on the spine only); in other words, its form as well as its content provide a bit of a jolt.

Some artists' books have no pictures, and are categorized by an esoteric but inescapable "visual" component that also separates them from concrete poetry. (If this sounds vague, you can fall back on the Duchampian prop: "It's an artist's book if an artist made it, or if an artist says it is.") I. Rose's books and postcards offer the kind of poetic insight into our absurd social condition that art is supposed to offer; sometimes she omits images or provides them vicariously. ("Bad news . . . bad news . . . i am looking for my anger but it's not there. Instead i find this grey cloud of cotton.") Mariona Barkus's annual *Illustrated History* offers twelve monthly postcards, pictures sparked by newspaper clippings on the pressing issues of our time from the defeat of the ERA to "bone dogs." Matthew Geller's 1983 *Engagements* is a calendar offering a *New York Post* headline for every day of your year—an apocalyptic assurance that it will probably happen to you, eventually. Still less overtly "artistic" is Jane Greengold's marvelous unillustrated *Excerpts from the Diaries of Agatha Muldoon*, the take-away part of a meticulously realistic installation under the Brooklyn Bridge; both book and art were so convincing that many viewers thought the fictional character of Agatha was as real as the history of her environment.

Don Russell has pointed out that an awareness of the book form is an absolute necessity. The page is a very specific space in a very specific context and must be as carefully considered as the surface of a canvas and the space in which it's exhibited. Given the avant-garde mandate to "experiment," the best artists' books are either those that invent and enrich within this formal consciousness, or those that are aware of the special uses for content this form allows. (Ideally there is no either/or, but integrated examples are rare.)

Here, in brief, are a few more recent books that fulfill some of my

Top: Mimi Smith, *This is a Test*, 1983.

Center: Dona Ann McAdams, *The Nuclear Survival Kit*, 1981.

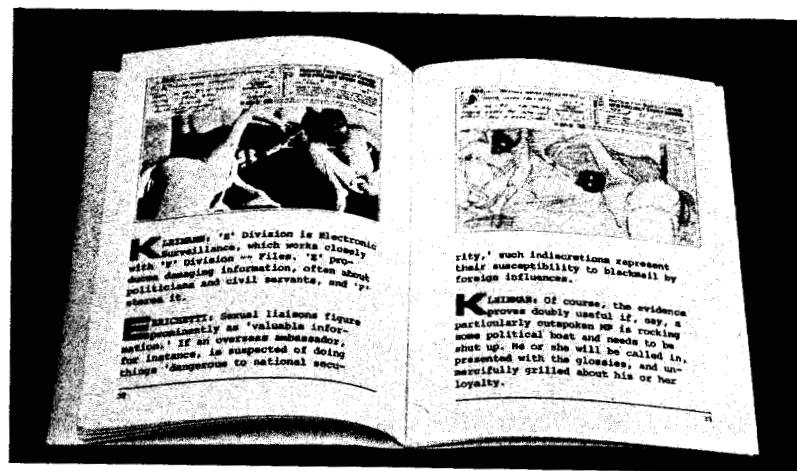
Bottom: Sharon Gilbert, *A Nuclear Atlas*, 1982.



Paul Rutkovsky, *Commodity Character*, 1982.

criteria. (Many more have been published over the last decade; by 1979, the "Vigilance" show at Franklin Furnace offered a reading room of over 100 books for social change.) Mimi Smith in *This is a Test*, Sharon Gilbert in *A Nuclear Atlas*, and Dona Ann McAdams in *The Nuclear Survival Kit* have all made witty and scary books about the grimmest news of all, the first two couched in almost appallingly lyrical graphics. John Greyson's *Breathing Through Opposing Nostrils: A Gay Espionage Thriller* is a hybrid that began (in Canada) as a performance and evolved into a series of text/drawings, a complex slide/video/film piece, and an artist's book. A fictionalized narrative of divisiveness, paranoia, and infiltration in Toronto's gay and lesbian community, it's a riveting tale told with political irony and morality. Strictly speaking, it could be called an illustrated book, but you can tell it's an artist's book because you've never seen anything quite like it in bookstores or libraries. *Unexpectedness (not to be confused with obscurity) is a hallmark of the best of the genre.*

For instance, Paul Rutkovsky's *Commodity Character* is a deceptively straightforward photobook with long narrative captions. It delves into the daily lives of several working families and individuals. These people may or may not be fictional composites (their pictures are definitely "posed"), but their relationship to what they want, can afford, and actually buy is nothing if not real. Each episode is accompanied by "commodity symbols" which are the key to "the money value and the time value of each character's situation: too much money, too little money, too much time, too little time." This sounds simple enough, and probably sounds boring. But it has humor, accessibility, and quiet graphic



John Greyson, *Breathing Through Opposing Nostrils: A Gay Espionage Thriller*, 1983.

surprises. Rutkovsky has managed to cram into each plain parable an astonishing amount of information about how life in these United States works, avoiding pretentiousness and condescension. Unlike many artists' books this one can be read and studied over and over. It would make a great text for high school civics classes. *Commodity Character's* companion is a flimsy newsprint would-be supermarket—a fake mail order *Catalogue: Order Now*. With ambiguous photos and deadpan phrases, it describes unidentified products by their shopping mall location, color, texture, weight, and price: "GAMES N' GADGETS. Upper Level between Maas Brothers and Rainbow Shop. Color: yellow, blue, white, orange, green. Texture: fuzzy and smooth. Weight: 2 lbs. Price: \$14.99 + tax = \$15.74."

On the same subject, Micki McGee's *Something for Nothing: A Department Store of a Different Order* (which was also an exhibition, a giveaway event, and a videotape) is a literate and varied analysis of supply and demand under Southern California capitalism. Paul Goodman's *Empire City* is quoted: "Is it bad stuff?' 'no, just useless,' said Horatio sadly. . . ." McGee too plays on the mail-order catalogue format (and museum catalogues) for her main section, dividing her products into their "functions"—"to disguise nature or the effects of nature," "to show you have time to play, time to waste, time to kill," "to demonstrate class ascendancy," "to enhance sexual exchange value," etc. These books make fine analytical accomplices to Beverly Naidus's packets of stickers for guerrilla actions at the supermarket, questioning products' usefulness, prices, and ingredients.

There is a certain irony to all this exposure of conspicuous consump-



Mariona Barkus, *Illustrated History*, 1983.

tion in that artists' books themselves are distinctly luxury items, commodities with dubious exchange value on the current market. What are they for? You'd think there was already enough stuff flashing by us. But artists' books, like performance art, seem to have located yet another mysterious lacuna crying to be filled. I know, because I'd miss them if they went away. Also, like performance art, artists' books are best defined as whatever isn't anything else. They aren't quite photobooks, comic books, coffee-table books, fiction, illustration.

Perhaps this negative definition defines the trap of inaccessibility artists' books have fallen into. They can seem just another instance of artistic escapism, elitism, and self-indulgence. But they are also an indication of a growing need for direct exchange and communication with audiences who have more to teach artists than the existing ones. Maybe artists' books are a state of mind. Despite their general lack of visible effectiveness, they are part of a significant subcurrent beneath the artworld mainstream that threatens to introduce blood, sweat, and tears to the flow of liquitex, bronze, and bubbly.

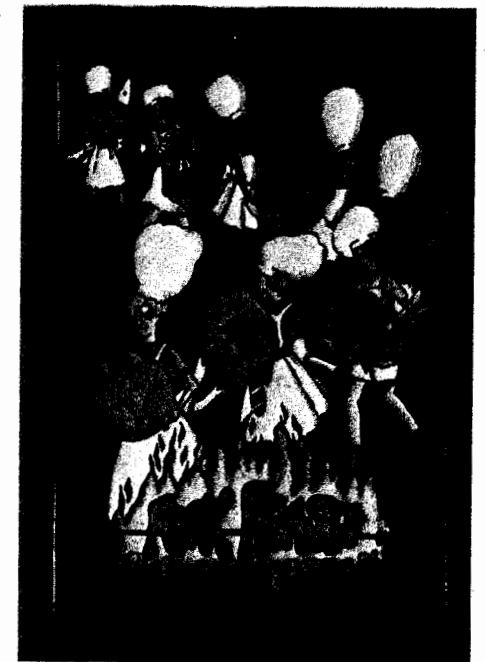
NOTES

1. *Art Rite*, no. 14 (Winter 1976-1977).
2. *Artery: The National Forum for College Art* 5, no. 4 (April, 1982).
3. *The Empire's Old Clothes*, Ariel Dorfman. New York: Pantheon.

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