

Artists' Books in the 1960s

Thomas Hvid Kromann

Abstract

The “artist’s book”, a distinctive and popular art form which appeared in the 1960s, replaced the white cube with the portable exhibition. Although anticipated by a few pioneers from the early avant-gardes, artists such as Åke Hodell made interesting contributions in the 1960s to the international field. The artist’s book, whether mass-produced or created as a limited edition, was a genuine cross-aesthetic artefact and it served as a vehicle for artistic ideas and concepts, sometimes by transgressing the codex of the book or by experimenting with its layout, binding and the fixed sequence of the pages.

In 1968 the Danish artist Per Kirkeby published his artists’ book *blå, tid* (blue, time) at the small press Panel 13. In a newspaper review of this monochrome work consisting of 86 blue pages, the music critic Poul Nielsen wrote that Kirkeby’s book should be regarded as a “symptom of an artistic situation, which can [currently] be observed in all the arts” (Nielsen 1968).

The current situation that Poul Nielsen refers to was the result of the trans-aesthetic strategies of the Nordic avant-gardes of the 1960s. These strategies can be observed in every aspect of artistic endeavour. For instance, there was inventive experimentation with the book medium in this period. These “artists’ books”, as they would be described in the US and Britain from the beginning of the 1970s, may not constitute *the* privileged form of the period – that would contradict the anti-hierarchical tendencies of the 1960s, with their flourishing of happenings, paintings, musical compositions etc. But the artists’ book represents an important vehicle for artistic ideas and concepts, especially in minimal art, conceptual art and Fluxus. By replacing the gallery with a portable exhibition (the artists’ book), and because of its low price and easy distribution, the artists’ book fitted in perfectly with the ideas of the democratisation of art. The ideal of democratisation was, however, more predominant in the US than in Europe. The Americans published their (often mass-produced) books in small presses outside the art institutions (the paradigmatic example would, of course, be Ed Ruscha and his artists’ book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, from 1963), whereas the Europeans often collaborated with galleries or museums.

In Europe there is a higher frequency of artists' books that take the shape of regular *book objects*: i.e., books where the codex has been challenged or even transgressed.

The boom of artists' books in the 1960s was – from an international perspective – anticipated by some experiments by the avant-garde movements in the 1910s and 1920s. Likewise there are predecessors of the book artists of the 1960s in Scandinavia. A Swedish artist such as C.-O. Hultén (*Drömmar ur bladens händer* (Dreams from the Hands of Leaves, 1947)) and a Danish artist like K.J. Almqvist (*Tomhed* (Emptiness, 1933); *Visdom* (Wisdom, 1934), *et ord – i al evighed* (a word – for all eternity, 1945) and *Demokrati* (Democracy, 1951)) contributed pioneering works in this respect – and not only in a Nordic context – although they have been completely overlooked. Two internationally recognised examples are *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1959), artists' books filled with appropriated sentences and illustrations that the Danish artist Asger Jorn created together with Guy Debord, during their cooperation in the Situationist International. These two artists' books are recognised as prominent examples of the situationist technique of “détournement” – anti-works, in the situationist tradition – but often not as artists' books, although in retrospect that is evidently what they are.

In the 1960s experiments with the book medium intensified, and among the most interesting contributors to the field in this period were the Swedes Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd and Åke Hodell and the Danes Per Kirkeby, Stig Brøgger and Henrik Have. In the writings of artists belonging to the Nordic avant-garde there is a vigorous plea for hybrid forms, but no separate discourse on artists' books, book objects or the book as a medium. Theoretical discussions were limited to reviews of hybrid book works in magazines and newspapers. An exception is the Danish writer Erik Thygesen, who in an essay entitled “Med patronhylstre, smykkeskin, peberbøsser som fortællere” (With Cartridge Cases, Jewel Cases, Pepper Pots as Narrators) in the little magazine *ta'* (number 6, 1968), tentatively pleads for especially two kinds of ruptures with the traditional codex-bound book: “the box” (dissolution of the traditional codex) and “the installation/showroom” (dissolution of the medium as a whole). The latter could be exemplified by Thygesen's own book installation called *Roman i rum* (Novel in Room or Novel in Space), which presented 100 different objects placed in transparent plastic sleeves hanging from the ceiling by thin green strings of nylon. According to its “author”, this “book” represented a “series of epic possibilities connected by a complex of ideas” (Thygesen 1968: 28). The idea was to avoid the fixed sequence of the book and to leave the interpretation of the physical material entirely to the “reader”, who was free to combine the information provided in whatever way he wanted. Thygesen's *Roman i rum*

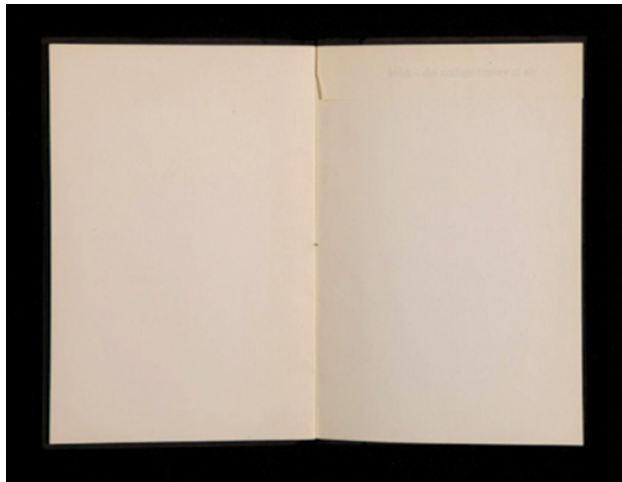
is akin to the American Fluxus artist Alison Knowles's *Big Book* (1966–1969), an oversize book and writing installation that was exhibited in the US but also at the Art Library in the Nikolaj Church in Copenhagen in 1967. Although Thygesen's "book", in contrast to Knowles's *Big Book*, doesn't look like a book, but resembles an installation of various materials, it is still the concept of the book medium that is brought into focus. Such "books" in many ways transgress the traditional codex, layout, binding and the fixed sequence of pages and exemplify the radicality of the rethinking of the book's structure and purpose in the 1960s.

Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd contributed to this tendency with the works *Reader's Digest* (1959) and *Samlade verk* (Collected Works, 1963), which are both unique *book objects*, designed as massive but very elegant blocks of wood, which actually look like books. Through their material and illegibility, these sculptural works remind the reader of the basic material of books: wood. A quite different but similarly playful and serious concept is found in Reuterswärd's *Prix Nobel*. Unlike the majority of artists' books, *Prix Nobel* exists in different versions, as a text, as paintings and as a recorded recitation of the book (1963). The original text is an accurate reproduction of all the punctuation marks, but not the *text* itself, from an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from 1960. The book version from 1966 has been extended considerably and is 96 pages long. The "text" is reduced to its full stops, commas, columns, question marks and exclamation marks, but not the letters in the text. Whether it is an invitation to the reader to fill in the empty spaces or whether it is a kind of map of the starry sky of the written language is open to discussion, but *Prix Nobel* possesses a peculiar conceptual beauty. The emphasis on the material dimension of language seems closely related to the simultaneous project of the concrete poetry of the 1960s.

Some of the most remarkable contributions in Scandinavia in this decade came from Åke Hodell, who published a number of artists' books from his own small press Kerberos, situated in Stockholm. The close link between Hodell's small press and his artists' books is symptomatic of a general tendency, since artists' books (as well as other artists' publications, such as pamphlets, posters etc.) and small presses were often interrelated. Hodell's artists' books constitute a heterogeneous group of works. Some are ready-made works, such as *Bruksanvisning för symaskinen Singer Victoria* (The Singer Victoria Sewing Machine User Manual: A Novel, 1965) and *Heidenstams Nya Dikter* (Heidenstam's New Poems, 1967), respectively an appropriated manual and an aggressive *détournement* – through blobs of ink – of the poems by the celebrated national poet Verner von Heidenstam (1859–1940), whose poetry collection *New Poems* was originally published in 1915. By literally casting

stains on Heidenstam's honour, a both symbolic and concrete gesture, Hodell enacts what he himself has described as a showdown with Hodell's own childhood and adolescence, represented by the nationalistic and conservative tendency in Heidenstam's poetry. In 1965 and 1966 Hodell published two sombre artists' books with a distinctive Holocaust theme. The first, *Orderbuch* (Order Book, 1965), seems to be a concentration camp guard's long inventory of the usability of the dead prisoners ("Seife", "Motoröl", "Unbrauchbar" – soap, engine oil, useless), who are represented not by names but by numbers. The second book has the cryptic title *CA 36715 (J)*. The "J" stands for "Jude" (Jew) and the number "36715" is printed on a passport photo of an anonymous prisoner, which appears at the beginning of the book. The book purports to be the prisoner's handwritten diary, but the handwriting is completely illegible, not because the writing is hard to decipher but because there seems to be nothing to interpret in this dehumanised handwriting, which becomes more and more shapeless and finally blackens the page completely. At the end of the decade Hodell published *U.S.S. Pacific Ocean* (1968), a book bearing the subtitle "A Story about the World Police", and *Mr. Nixon's Dreams* (1970). In both books he assembled photographic material such as maps, uniforms, slogans, costume dolls in military uniforms etc. in a sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, critique of the US as the policeman of the world. The pictures in *U.S.S. Pacific Ocean* constitute a story about the submarine whose name appears in the book's title: a submarine that detaches itself from the high command of the American president and – in agreement with the American propaganda featured throughout the book – starts off a series of attacks with nuclear weapons on its own initiative.

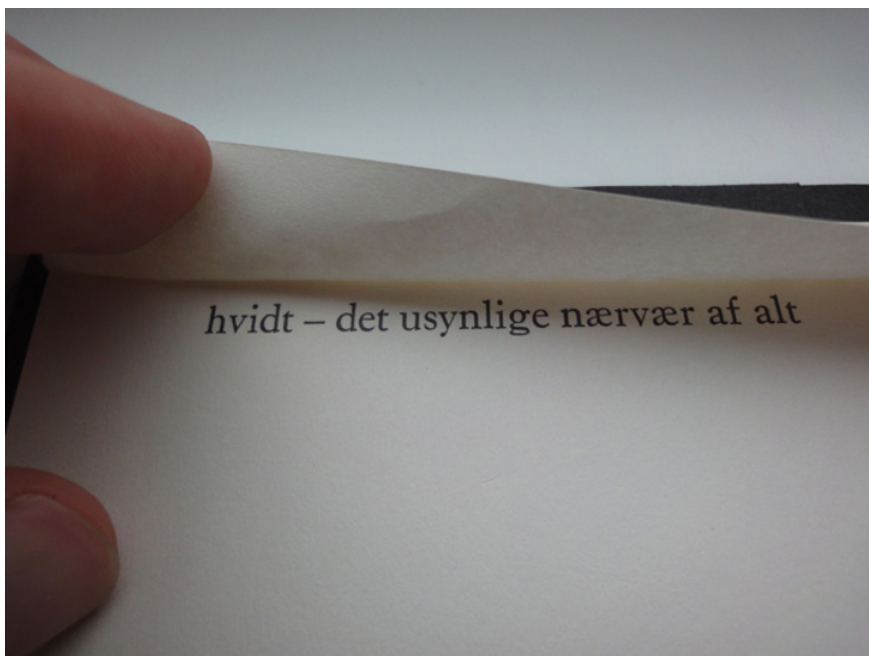
Mention should also be made of a handful of "empty books" by Danish artists from the 1960s. "Emptiness" wasn't a fixed artistic or philosophical concept but a heterogeneous approach, which was linked to, for example, minimalism, concrete poetry and Zen Buddhism. One could tentatively differentiate between a metaphysical concept of emptiness (Yves Klein) and a non-metaphysical version (John Cage). Danish examples include: Vagn Steen's *Skriv selv* (Go on Write/Write!, 1965); Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's *vedr. visse foreteelser/en hvidbog* (Regarding Certain Phenomena/A White Book, 1967); and Per Kirkeby's *blå, tid* (blue, time, 1968). The concept of emptiness varies considerably in these three books from the 1960s. *Go on Write* is a 128-page empty scribble block, which invites the reader to become the author of this work (the invitation is written on the front and back pages of the book). As in the artists' book *Poème collectif* (1968) by the French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, the democratisation of the arts and the participation of the reader/spectator are the focus here. The concept of emptiness is rather different in *Regarding Certain Phenomena*, which is



Page from Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's vedr. visse foreteelser/en hvidbog (1967) with paper strip covering the text.

only 12 pages long and completely blank, except for the four sentences hidden behind white slips of paper and a white frame framing two white pages. The sentences that are covered are: “©1967/hans-jørgen nielsen”, “hvidt – det usynlige nærvær af alt” (white – the invisible presence of everything), a blank space (representing an empty sentence!) and, finally, “hvidt – det synlige fravær af alt” (white – the visible absence of everything). *Regarding Certain Phenomena* can be analysed in various ways; the two most obvious are an investigation of whiteness in a strictly materialistic and a Zen Buddhist sense. Like most Western art influenced by the Zen boom in the 1950s and 1960s, this work may be a subjective and simplified conception of Zen Buddhism, but more important is its affinity with the minimalist tendencies of the period (Copeland 2009). The last example of an empty book is *blå, tid* by Per Kirkeby, a book consisting of 86 unnumbered blue pages. The traditional sequentiality of the book medium has been suspended, although the codex is kept, and emphasis is put on the material aspects of the medium instead of the content (although the colour blue possesses various types of significance, including romantic and art-historical associations).

Other artists' books made by visual artists worth mentioning include other books by Per Kirkeby – for example *blå, 5* (blue, 5, 1965) and *Landskaberne* (The Landscapes, 1969) – as well as books by Stig Brøgger (*To Lady Victoria Welby*; *Veruschka Thinks* and *21. marts 1969*, 1968–1969) and Bjørn Nørgaard (*I anledning af Det Kgl. Kunstakademis konkurrence om Den lille Guldmedalje 1969* (On the Occasion of the Royal Academy's Competition for the Small Gold



Page from Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's vedr. visse foreteelser/en hvidbog (1967) showing text under paper strip.

Medal 1969, 1969)). The works of Fluxus artist Henrik Have did not surface until around 1970. His artists' books from 1968–1975 – for example, the book object *Sun after Lunch* (1971), which consists of a pile of various printed papers fixed with a string – remain cryptic. But they were vital contributions to the field of artists' books in Scandinavia.

Although the artistic practice has flourished since the 1960s, the reception has been quite limited. Nordic artists' books have been almost completely invisible in international scholarly literature (for example, Drucker 1994 and Møeglin-Delcroix 1997/2012) and have not been included in the major exhibitions of the field. This can be partly explained by the lack of academic and critical interest with which artists' books have been greeted in the Nordic countries. In general, there seems to be a tendency to overlook the artists' books in the collected oeuvre of an artist. One should, however, mention the early presentation of the influential American artists, and some of the Nordic artists, such as Kirkeby, Brøgger and Have in the Swedish art magazine *Kalejdoskop* no. 1/2 in 1980 (ed. Sune Nordgren). Mention should also be made of the various writings and exhibitions of artists' books by the Swedish artist Leif Eriksson (Eriksson 1981 and 2005/06). These writings appeared early, but

they have not been widely influential, possible owing to their non-scholarly nature and because of their lack of focus on terminological questions. Recently things seems to have changed, insofar as Danish artists' books, at least, have been included in scholarly works about the 1960s (Ørum 2009, Kromann 2009) and a monograph covering Danish artists' books (Kromann et al. 2013). But artists' books from the Nordic countries are in many ways a field that remains unexplored.

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Edited by

Tania Ørum
Jesper Olsson

Editorial panel

Birgitte Anderberg
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