



The Century of Artists' Books

Johanna Drucker

Introduction by Holland Cotter

Books have a debased status in the modern world. In their conventional design of stacked and bound pages, they are perfect things, the ways eggs are a perfect food. Portable, storable, easily accessible, they pack a lot of energy in a clean, neat, pleasing form. Even a casual beach-blanket reader appreciates this artful structure.

At the same time, as mass-market items, books as physical constructions are secondary rather than primary objects. Content matters more than form. Whether *Hamlet* comes printed in small or large type, in deluxe illustrated editions or in braille, it is *Shakespeare* that sells, not the packaging. You don't like the copy of *Hamlet* you have? Throw it away. Get another, different one: newer, prettier, the variorum edition, perhaps.

The books documented in *The Century of Artists' Books* transform the condition of bookness, and complicate it. They change its status from secondary to primary, from instrumental to originaive, from common to rare, without renouncing other identities. Many of the artist's books in Johanna Drucker's ground-breaking work are hand-made and unique, or produced in small, precious editions. Others qualify for inclusion, no matter what their press run, simply by constructively dismantling an array of definitional/oppositional terms: form, content; special, common; original, copy.

In almost every case, attention to the book's visual presence — its objectness — is pronounced, in a manner that embraces elements of painting, sculpture, collage and filmic techniques. The conceptual dimensions of the book are similarly broadened. Some of these artists' books are made for reading, some for looking; some for touching; many for all three. In content, they range from political statements, to formal meditations, to personal fantasies. They are often exquisitely crafted; they are also visually wild, inscrutable, and weird. Scholars and connoisseurs will want to study them; kids, particularly kids with hungry, highly developed imaginations, will just want to get their hands on them.

I was one of those kids, interested equally in art and poetry. "His nose is always buried in a book," my mother and father would say about their pre-adolescent son, not sure they shouldn't be a little worried. And well they might have been if, by some back-to-the-future miracle, *The Century of Artists' Books* had been around at the time. In it they would have found documented such alarming items as Clifton Meador's *Book of Doom*, with its consumer-culture visual nightmare of cars going straight to hell; Joan Lyons' *The Gynecologist*, with its graphic account of a scalpel-happy medical establishment; and Scott McCarney's *No Mo Pro Mo Ho Mo Pho Bo*, with its image of right-wing politician's lips being sealed by a sweet queer kiss.

Even without such primers for revolution to be concerned about my parents sensed a larger "book problem," one intrinsic to books as a form. My bookishness meant that I spent a lot of mental time away from them, away from the world, away from the here and now. And who knew where I was? Unlike paintings, or sculptures, or films, books are created for one-on-one interactions. They are, by nature, zones of privacy. There is no way, short of censorship, for an outside observer to monitor or control the intimate encounters they offer and the education they provide.

As a child, I had access to several "art books," and the one I spent the most time with was a big, classy Harry N. Abrams production *Art Treasures from the Louvre*. Its cover was spattered with *fleurs de lys*; its color plates were printed by Conde Nast; its reproduced master paintings included the greatest of the greats. I had my first art history lesson in its canonical lineup of paintings by Da Vinci, Van Eyck, Dürer and Correggio. Far more important, I got a formative sentimental education through art; in sex, violence, death, religion, and personal comportment. All thanks to the unsupervised play in the Louvre's galleries which the book allowed.

Although I couldn't have explained why, I was very conscious of this dynamic. In part it explains my early attraction to Emily Dickinson, whose poems and letters I read in a Doubleday Anchor paperback my mother owned. What especially intrigued me about Dickinson was that she made books from her handwritten poems, tying the pages together with string, and storing the results away in a box, which, as far as is known, she told no one about.

The psychological self-containment implicit in this control over creative product — the independence of mind, the self-sufficiency, the self-confidence — appealed to me deeply. In the late 1960s, I was a student at a school that

owned many of Dickinson's pamphlet-like books, or fascicles as they are called. One rainy fall day in my first year, I visited the university's rare books and manuscripts library where they were kept, and asked if I could see them. The librarian hesitated, but as I was the only person around that afternoon, she led the way to a locked room, gave me a pair of white cloth gloves, pulled out a kind of flatfile tray, and handed me one of Dickinson's "books."

It was made of plain, folded sheets of letter paper, with two holes punched in the left edges and string passed through and tied to hold everything together. Each page was filled to the margins — top, bottom and sides — with swooping, slanting writing, long and short dashes, and occasional underscores. Because of Dickinson's idiosyncratic hand the words were no more legible to me than Islamic calligraphy might have been. To me it seemed obvious that she intended to create a bold, baffling visual object as much as a book of poems, an object made magnetic in part by being unreadable.

It's little wonder that the fascicles, found in a drawer after Dickinson's death, have become the focus of fetishistic scrutiny, their dimensions measured, their stains and creases documented, their watermarks researched. Issued in editions of one, they might fall under the description of "rare and/or auratic objects," one of the several categories that Drucker applies to her survey of books made by artists, some of whom, like Charles Bernstein, Joe Elliot, Lyn Hejinian, and Tom Phillips are also poets, and many of whom use text as a visual as well as linguistic element.

Hand-crafting, singularity, and consequent restricted access, have contributed to giving art objects the enormous prestige they enjoy in the West, though books seldom figure in the foremost ranks of preciousness. In other parts of the world, however, books (often in non-codex forms) are awarded primary aesthetic value, and have incalculable social, and political power.

In China, the ink and brush handscroll or album by a revered scholar-artist was considered to embody the vital energy of its genius-creator, an energy carried forward in time through faithful copies by other genius-artists. And beyond its connection to an individual it distilled the ethos and intellectual self-identity of a culture. Mao's *Little Red Book*, commercially printed in millions of copies, retained something of this charismatic status.

Iconicity of the book is still more emphatic in the case of the Koran, which is the conceptual center of a religion. But handwritten copies carry

list of
artist facsimiles
reproduces

special sanctity, and are often formally distinctive, doing everything to underscore their physicality, their bookness. Some conceived for liturgical use are so huge as to require a team of men to lift them. Others are tiny enough to fit into brooches and medallions so owners can wear them everywhere, like jewels. If a Koran is illuminated by a master painter, or copied by a great calligrapher using the finest paper and ink mixed with lampblack from a holy shrine, its worth is increased beyond price.

Ultimately, though, the value of this book lies not in what it feels like and looks like, but in what it does. It is an interactive thing; it generates blessings, absorbs devotion; its political and intellectual uses are fluid and open-ended. As such, it may have something in common with Drucker's notion of the artist's book as a conceptual or performative space, a dynamic arena of perceptual interaction.

Do I stray too far from the modern secular art tradition? Maybe, though, of course, that tradition has its own complex code of sacrality and charisma. My purpose is to give a pan-cultural sense of how expansive and fluid the concept of the book-as-art-object can be.

Naturally, the model changes in a Western context. There, intellectual and spiritual value is converted to market value, which the artist's book, by playing with concepts of uniqueness and multiplicity, aestheticism and functionality, does much to confuse and confound. Even the complicated status that results, however, can't fully explain why the book, so richly developed by the hands of artists, has so little captured the eye of the mainstream art world.

Rather than attempt explanations, *The Century of Artists' Books* presents the richness. It does so in a clarifying, synthesizing way that subsequent histories will build upon, and in a language they will be wise to emulate: direct, jargon-free, propulsively paced, judiciously but trenchantly personalized (Drucker reserves most of her critical opinions, some quite strong, for the footnotes), with description and interpretation given equal weight.

The sense of personal involvement — Drucker is herself a notable book artist and passionate advocate for the form — is particularly appealing to those of us who were in New York in the early 1970s, and watched that history unfolding in a modern, urban context. The experience for me included unforgettable early exhibitions at Franklin Furnace and at Printed Matter. Fluxus was still a source of inventive books and book-like things, as was Dick Higgins's Something Else Press, turning out books that were at once

experimental and buyable thanks to his use of conventional production and distribution strategies.

Many artists I knew were performers of one kind or another. And along with whatever else they did, most of them created notebook-type books, drawn and collaged, part diary, part documentary, part workshop for performance texts or dance notation. These people were not strictly speaking book artists, but they were participating, however informally, in what was beginning to coalesce as a movement. After the appetite-addled clamor of Pop, the portentous sonorities of Minimalism, and radical evacuations of early Conceptualism, the book form offered attractive options: multimedia breadth, visual and intellectual density, emotional privacy, and affordability, all important features during the economically punishing 1970s and early 80s.

Is the scale of the book format inherently resistant to the American art world's obsession with colossalism, exemplified now by the size of Chelsea gallery spaces? Does the interactive nature of the book account for its neglect? Real art objects, as opposed to craft objects, are supposed to just sit there looking pretty, but books invite engagement, often demand it. Or maybe the sheer range of the artist's book is too wide for the market to grasp and process? Just look at the examples catalogued in this survey: books as social documents and personal archives, psychodramas and position papers, historical investigations and activist tools, love letters and hate-mail, linear narratives, and abstractions: all the while these projects encompass aspects of painting, sculpture, photography, film and installation art. Whether outward-reaching or inward looking, they offer new ideas about what is art and what art can be. That the numbers of artists producing books has grown — in part thanks to the digital revolution — exponentially since *The Century of Artists' Books* first appeared suggests that artists and audiences are hungry for new strategies and ideas. Drucker's book, now embarked on its second century, is for them, for us.

Holland Cotter

New York City, Summer 2004