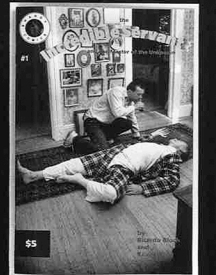


**JEROME  
BOOK ARTS  
FELLOWSHIP  
EXHIBITION**

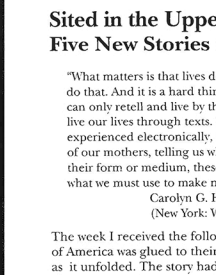
MINNESOTA CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS  
DECEMBER 7, 1991 - FEBRUARY 22, 1992



Karen Wirth



Ricardo Bloch & Kevin Kling



Amy Unger

**Sited in the Upper Midwest:  
Five New Stories from Minnesota**

"What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives."

Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1988)

The week I received the following books on my doorstep, most of America was glued to their TV sets to watch a riveting drama as it unfolded. The story had the elements of myth: humble but honest beginnings, the rise from poverty, academic excellence rewarded by acceptance at a prestigious university, the rise to power and glory. Somewhere in the third act, just as the hero was about to don the robes of the highest honor, a figure from the past appeared from the wings to reveal a secret, a sexual secret that threatened to topple the hero and tarnish the reputation of the king. Millions drew closer to the electronic hearth to better hear the stories of Judge Clarence Thomas and Professor Anita Hill. They were each joined by a Greek chorus of supporters, who in turn chanted their histories and their versions of the story. This web of stories was constantly updated, condensed and reiterated by television and radio commentators at every break. Veteran commentators were called in to act as oracles. America held its breath and watched.

In this country, most stories are told by someone else. People feel the need to take classes in storytelling while incessantly tuning into docu-dramas created by a handful of script writers. The evening news has become sensationalized, reflecting the popularity of the supermarket tabloids with their headlines that defy belief. Most of the films and videos created for popular consumption are dazzling in their technique, but thin on

content, or worse, simply banal. Even though there are other voices to be heard, rising production costs make it unlikely that unconventional stories will be seen or read, and most of the reading public has never heard of artists' books. And we are still hungry for stories.

"I let their stories and lives unfold before me as my own journey did. Their words became part of my story and my dreams."

Karen Wirth, in *Continental Drifting*

Karen Wirth's *Continental Drifting* uses a format that is a cross between a map and a folder of souvenir postcards to chronicle a 7,000 mile trip around the American West. Her trip begins and ends in Minnesota. The photos of her trip are quite small, the size of 35 mm film. These images of signposts along the trail are contact printed on the terrain she travels, and are held in place by the grid of longitude and latitude. As we journey with Wirth through this book we experience the feeling of being in foreign territory, unsettled by a strange landscape that is not what it appears. Not only is the grid of the map skewed, disorienting the weary traveler, but the tiny rivulets of text are written in different directions, so we must turn the map/book this way and that to orient ourselves and find our location. The map is tacked down at the edges by four short pieces by Wirth entitled *The Journey*, *The Place*, *The Dream*, and *The Book*, that ground us on this journey.

The legends commonly found at the edges of conventional maps disclose critical information. In Wirth's book, the legends have multiplied and are scattered over the face of the book, and here we can take the term 'legends' literally: these are excerpts from the writings of pioneer women, culled from obscure diaries found by Wirth on her journey. They ring true to her and to the reader as the document of the real journey, the poetic journey of life on the trail.

One of the most remarkable things I've seen in the last decade was the mythologist Joseph Campbell telling his audience of Public Television viewers to "Follow your Bliss!" The enormous popularity of his work again points to our need for transformative stories of all kinds, and his great gift, it seems to me, was his

overview of mythology from a variety of cultures other than just one: Western European.

"More curious was the fact I was not myself in this dream. I was a person I did not know from sight but I was aware of how this person felt, saw, and believed, morally, spiritually and physically as if I was both a guest of the body and in command at the same time."

Kevin Kling, in *The Incredible Servant and the Master of the Unknown*

In Ricardo Bloch's and Kevin Kling's hilarious foto novela titled *The Incredible Servant and the Master of the Unknown*, we find the myth of the hero acted out through black and white photos that range from set up shots of the protagonist, to images "borrowed" from comics, war photo archives, science manuals, and by the look of it, portrait collections of dogs as well as army recruits who've just finished basic training. Bloch is a photographer, but also to the point, a native of Mexico where foto novelas abound. His former vocation of scientist comes into the story in Chapter Two, where the past of the Master of the Unknown is revealed to be that of a scientist, probably a mad scientist.

The story begins with the hero sitting at a table engrossed in a comic book version of the classic *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The hero is drinking dairy fresh milk and eating a bologna sandwich made with Regular Wonderbread. This entire scene is symbolic, given what happens next. The hero, a regular Joe kind of guy, a lightly slumpy everyman, is hurtled through his own story, and back and forth through history and several realities. I've always thought of the foto novela form as a black and white soap opera, but here it takes on mythic themes, with a debt to Dante Alighieri acknowledged on the inside cover.

Kling begins each chapter with a handwritten notebook text, esoteric in feeling. It is illustrated with select frames from comic books that are archetypal images and stories. The tone of the text is that of the Victorian novel, with appropriate elements that include an abundance of eccentric character, and slightly flowery language. In this confessional journal, symbolism is

found in the mundane, such as the naming of mongrels or the names given to libations at a bar called, keeping within the transformational theme, *The Dragon's Flagon*. In *The Incredible Servant*, our mundane black and white halftone world is made fuller by Kling's and Bloch's insistence that several realities exist on the same plane, in this case, the picture plane of their book. And, as with the best comics, we're left hanging at the end. To be continued.

"When I took his picture by the front door sign, out in the sand and pine barrens of rural Rhode Island, he said, 'Look at the spider web outside the front door, the oldest lacemaker.'"

Rosemary Smith's interview with lacemaker York Roberts in *Her Story In Lace*

Rosemary Smith's *Her Story In Lace* and *LACEMAP* track through pages of text and image, the process and herstory of lace and its makers, including how it was brought to America. *LACEMAP* is a large accordion map of the lace world, its travel routes and trade towns. In *Her Story In Lace*, anecdotes, literary references, and sections on Medieval and Renaissance lace are interspersed with transparent images of lace that have been generated on the computer. As Smith's herstory comes into the recent past, the eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of lacemakers become less romanticized. Lacemakers' training and subsequent working conditions come close to what most factory workers in other trades were experiencing at the time. For instance, as late as 1901, in Nottingham, England, over 14,000 women were engaged in lacemaking. They earned between two and eight cents an hour.

Smith lets these facts speak for themselves. She never directly addresses the issues of the exploitation of the poor, but through the densely-packed pages of both general and personal histories, a web of information builds.

Smith's text is laser-printed on a Japanese paper called Masa that has the feel of fabric. These sheets of text and her colored, delicate images are housed in a linen-lined box with a plexiglass lid. Lace is sandwiched between thin sheets of plexi. We are

invited to open the container, at once treasure box and coffin for this dying craft. As Smith brings her story into the present, the evocative transparent images become fragmented, pale landscapes, reflecting the diminishment, the invisibility of lacemaking, and the melancholy state of the craft. At the very end of her text, the images and the thread of her history revive as she chronicles the stories of contemporary lacemakers working on the east coast of the United States.

"Seder: Aramaic for the Hebrew 'erekh—meaning 'order' of the service. The Seder service is never purely devotional. The ritual has a spiritual tone that is combined with humor, historical drama, playful entertainment, & observations of Jewish life."

Amy Unger, in *Why Is This Night Different?*

Amy Unger's book, *Why Is This Night Different?*, chronicles a recent Passover Seder, the service that celebrates the Jews' exodus from slavery in Egypt. Unger's family has been celebrating the Seder with the same family for more than two decades. The main text of the book is Unger's story of the preparation for the Seder dinner with all its symbolic foods. It is also a remembrance of family ritual and past Seders as well as a record of the present. Surrounding this text are woodcuts of ritual objects and food of the service, such as the bitter herbs, the wine glass, the lighted candles. At the top of the book there is a text in Hebrew with a frieze of images. Along the foreedge of the book is a sidebar of smaller text, elucidating each symbolic item of the dinner.

The book has the feel of a ritual book or a personal meditation on family history. The paper, Gutenberg Laid, has the earthy quality and color of the Matzo, the unleavened bread eaten at the Seder to symbolize the flight of the Jews from Egypt. This copy's cover of dark blue cloth and light blue paper is reminiscent of sundown, when day turns to night, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath.

As things change in Unger's life, the Seder remains a constant, but not dead, ritual. The Seder participants change too, as generations pass from childhood to adulthood, or one Seder stands out from all the rest because of a special guest.

Often when people create books about family history, they create diaries or scrapbooks. Although Unger's work has elements of the scrapbook, this work more closely resembles the Haggadah, the booklet containing the text of the service. It is read by every person at the table, from the youngest to the oldest, and is a major focal point of the service. Everyone participates, everyone reads, everyone remembers.

Many rituals, especially religious rituals, have been under scrutiny in the past two decades. Unger isn't creating, as many Jewish women have, a revisionist Seder; her position is different. She chooses to focus on relationships at a particular moment in time. Her role is clear. As she approaches thirty, she stands in the middle of this ritual as participant and observer, and as chronicler of the passage of time. She locates herself and her extended family in the present and "the possibilities of the future."

"The desire to toss something in a new way, or to toss it a greater distance, is fairly steady in men and boys..."

As Unger's book ends with a future of possibility, Linda Loven's book, *It's a Man's World*, starts with the psychic despair of life in the patriarchy, and explores different aspects of our life that reflect the "archetypal manifestations in modern Western civilization of the substitution/sublimation of phallic energy." Closed, the book is the shape of a half moon, opened it is a circle. We enter this book and see the skyline of a mythic American city which includes buildings such as The World Trade Center, the Washington Monument, and the TransAmerica Building. The Seattle "Space Needle" pops out from the center of the circular page, a phallic symbol among phallic symbols. Subsequent pages deal with the space program and the destruction of the ozone layer, medical testing, recreational hunting, energy technology, the military, team sports, and the chemicals used in agribusiness.

Each of the dozen openings use collaged "found" images from advertising and classical art. Loven takes the classical Greek nude male body, with exposed genitalia, to represent the patriarchy. Here, the nudity is important. She uses Monick's

statement as a point of departure:

"Men hide their source of authority and power, not exposing their sexuality, their genitalia, in a way similar to the cultural evasion of phallos as god-image."  
Eugene Monick

This is, in fact, a pop-up book where the fallacy of the phallicentric culture pops up everywhere. She includes a globe stand, so the book can be shown completely opened as a globe. But the real power of Loven's images is more visible when one actually holds the book and turns the pages. Then, her carefully considered collaged images can be appreciated at close range. Perhaps I'd better reconsider my choice of words. The language of destruction creeps into all of daily life, and into widely held conceptions about our life on this planet.

One of my favorite figures in the book is the recreational hunter. His bronze body sports a leopard-skin bolero, thrown over a camouflage hunting vest. His matching camouflage hunting cap grows antlers, a common hunting trophy. He holds a gun at penis level, so his metal penis blends in with the ornate ironwork of the trigger. Over his chest are the words "Everyman should own one perfect rifle." In the background is the forest primeval, in the foreground are mounds of dead animal parts. Don't miss the figure of the medical testing page, either. A marble body of Aesculapius, the father of medicine, stands next to a snake, originally a symbol of the goddess cultures and regeneration, now the symbol of the medical profession. He has the head of Frankenstein, and wears a spiral double helix necklace of DNA molecules. Not only has modern medicine created medical monsters, but the body of medicine itself is ruled by the head of a particular monster that symbolizes medical experimentation out of control.

Whether Minnesotans are on the edge of a trend, or their work has always been this way, is beyond the scope of this essay. From my perspective on the West Coast, I've seen a real change in books nationwide. Artists are returning to work with content. Much of the work is more accessible, as if artists are trying to communicate, and there is an audience that is learning to read visual books. Materiality of the process is important again, ironically, just at the time computers are accessible to many artists.

The variety of these works should be applauded. The stories here take many forms, from the focus on the everyday, the surprises of life's journey, and capturing history, to a cataclysmic view of our present and future, if we continue as we have been. Much of the book arts of the eighties focused on technique to the detriment of other issues. But here at the end of the century we see a turning point. Our collective distress about an increasingly desperate life on this planet is reflected in our art in a myriad of ways. It is forcing us to wake up, to pay attention. We need all of our storytellers to carry us into the next century.

Susan E. King  
Paradise Press, Los Angeles  
October 1991

While the books in this round of Jerome Fellowship projects are wildly different in execution, a common thread is the importance played by narrative in each. Perhaps a case could be made that storytelling is still alive in the vast heartland of the Midwest, which accounts for the emphasis on narrative in these

**Karen Wirth  
CONTINENTAL DRIFTING**

Both actual and metaphorical travel are the subjects of *Continental Drifting*. While keeping a visual journal on a cross-country trip, I became increasingly aware of many others who had traveled the same territory before me. I wanted to discover the lives of pioneer women. I searched out their diaries, and their own words became a path into historical perspectives, physical awareness, intellectual queries, and emotional connections. The structure of an accordion book, with its mountains and valleys in a linear yet circular format, emphasizes the act of travel over a landscape.

*Continental Drifting*, 1991, is a 16-page accordion book with a separate, tuck-closure wrapper. The type was set on a MacIIcx computer using Microsoft Word 4.0 and converted to linotronic type. The titles are New Century Schoolbook bold, and the text blocks are Bookman. The map and banners are hand-drawn, and the border texts are hand-written. The photographs are 100 line screens. *Continental Drifting* is offset printed in black on white Vintage velvet-finish 80# acid free cover stock in an edition of 650 copies. Closed dimensions are 7-1/2 x 4-15/16"; open dimensions are 7-1/2 x 39-1/2".

