

MINNESOTA CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS'

JEROME BOOK ARTS FELLOWSHIP EXHIBITION

MINNESOTA CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS

SEPTEMBER 9 — NOVEMBER 25, 1989



Jo Blatti, Linda Gammell, Sandra Menefee Taylor



Dean Lucker



Gaylord Schanilec



Karen Wirth, Robert Lawrence

Four New Works

A book artist, a minor character in Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* . . . , has enjoyed enough moderate success in his chosen work of altering existing books to cause a publisher to produce a book about the bookworks. This gives the artist great satisfaction, for he then has a virtually endless supply of books to alter and transform into bookworks. If this send-up notes the reflexivity that was the pivotal feature of artists' books in the seventies, the four works in this exhibition represent the diverseness and maturing of concerns that mark the evolving varieties of bookworks or artists' books. While visual and structural elements still function as content, there is an increasing emphasis on literary or informational material which communicates to the reader in consortium with the visual.

Landscape of Hope and Despair, an account of the demise of an American family farm, is the result of a collaboration by artist Sandra Menefee Taylor, photographer Linda Gammell, and social historian Jo Blatti. Its subtitle, *SE 1/4 Section 6, Township N, Range 21 W of the 5th Principle Meridian 160 Acres*, and a tombstone-like historical marker shown on the back cover are all that remain of the farm that belonged to Taylor's father and brother. The book has the feeling of a record album complete with liner notes which describe Bath Corners, Minnesota in memories and in filmstrips of family gatherings and parades. Its interior structure reveals itself as the book is read, standing finally as a sculptural landscape construction. An interview is printed on the "ground" above which accordions a series of plowed fields as a passerby might see them from the road while driving by. Ironic road signs mark place names, "Hope", "Hartland", "Freeborn". The last panel is abruptly disturbed by a woman's hand, hugely out of scale, rake-

shaped, moving over the dirt. The back of the accordion is quieter, nostalgic: a bit of a path near a silo, a country cemetery presided over by the most serene of stone women, a treelined road. But the hand is a disquieting enough image to pull one back to a more careful reading of the book which makes clear the transformation of the farmer into the artists, the authors, who cultivate, nurture, and harvest this book—this other way of life.

Each of the three authors brings a wealth of experience in her field to this project. Enough material was gathered for several books. But it is the sparseness of the editing that finally unites all the parts. The interview with father, son, and daughter, culled by Blatti from 172 pages of transcript, has been distilled into brief segments headed "The Place I Grew Up," "Moving," "Growing," "Farming," "Foreclosure," and "Reflections." These recollected moments of a fifty year family history move the text through the landscape of the book in concert with the images. The finished work is complex, intense, emotional, and richly layered, a book which one wants to return to several times. The structure and content of *Landscape of Hope and Despair* combines and recombines in a series of interwoven tracks in a seamless collaboration by three women of like spirit.

Farmers by Gaylord Schanilec also deals with the difficulties of sustaining the family farm in the 1980s. With the crisis currently overwhelming farm families it is not surprising that two of the four projects represented here deal with the issue that is so much a part of life in Minnesota. In each case the artist has used the filter of his/her working approach and attitude to develop two broadly divergent solutions to working with similar material.

Schanilec, unlike Taylor, did not grow up on a farm, but like many midwestern urban dwellers, has once-removed connections with the land through relatives who farm and through his recent purchase of a small farm in western Wisconsin. He views the book as a way of working with what has been lost and as a way of coming to terms with what he experienced as a lifetime of alienation from the part of the family that remained on the farm.

Farmers is a hardbound codex in the fine print tradition which combines handset letterpress type with multi-color wood engravings. The layout and typography are classic and pristine; the engravings are indebted to a photographic vision as well as to generations of the woodblock cutter's art. As many as six colors are overlaid to build an image of soft glowing transparency. Impeccable production values throughout, executed by a prodigious craftsman of traditional techniques, reinforce the book's feeling of timelessness, patience, immutability.

The book is divided into four sections, each an interview introduced by a double page spread wood engraving. The engravings show idealized farmscapes—golden wheat being harvested, trees arching over the entrance to a prosperous farm, blue skies dotted with fluffy clouds, modern machinery working the land, cows in winter pasture, a handsome complex of farm buildings. This is a textbook vision of the heartland impervious to the capriciousness of rainfall or economic policy. The texts tell a different story. Schanilec has interviewed four farmers: two are his uncles, one a neighbor and one a woman. All are articulate, strongly independent people who have chosen a way of life rather than a job, fully aware of the work and commitment involved in that choice. But something has gone terribly wrong that no amount of knowledge, hard labor, or planning can

overcome. The battle to save the family farm is being lost. In this context the nostalgic quality of the engravings is further heightened.

How to Make an Antique by Karen Wirth and Robert Lawrence is a time machine driven by metaphor, paradox, conundrum. The piece consists of a large-format deluxe one-of-a-kind book that is embedded into a table, a polychromed pastiche of historical styles, which also holds a monitor which displays a tape loop paralleling the content of the book. The whole is activated by the reader, who sits in a modern office chair with needlepoint seat, reading simultaneously from the book and the screen. The turning pages are mirrored in the videotape while the light coming from the screen reflects the book back on its own image.

Having physically entered the construction, the reader is free to ponder a barrage of textual material from the tape loop which is fixed in linear time, and the book, whose time-based nature may be entered with more flexibility.

The book has three fields: the page which is formed of handmade marbled paper; a dateline running across the bottom of the page marking time beginning in 35,000 B.C. with the first written record and ending in 1989 with the first video walkman; an inset text. The text, printed in xeroxed computer type, contains instructions on how to make antiques as well as social, historical, philosophical, and scientific quotes relating to time. Two facing pages might juxtapose a quote about eternity from *The Confessions of St. Augustine* with one about leap seconds or a text about antiquing jeans with a speculation on visualizing eons.

The tape, displayed on the monitor at the same scale as the book, has a full-screen image of a hand turning the marbled pages of the book, a McLuhanesque allusion to old media becoming the content for new. An inset rectangle, corresponding to the text insets of the book, displays images of a table being "antiqued," a progression of communication devices including book and computer; and historical landmarks such as Stonehenge, the sphinx, and the Parthenon. This last group might be labeled "new latest." Captions at the bottom of the screen make such pronouncements as "reasonably absolute," "probably unending," "nearly ageless," further qualifying the time frames.

By confronting the reader with a displacement of linear order and an integration of discrete systems (book, video, sculpture), *How to Make an Antique* prohibits a passive reading, initiating instead an active participation in the questioning of time and media relationships.

Dean Lucker's *Telephone Pole Shrines: Street Blessings* are five editioned color silkscreen prints mounted on hammered tin frames. Lucker has placed the prints on telephone poles in downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul where they function as environmental "pages" distinctive among the signs and images that clamor for attention on the city streets. They coexist with billboards, commercial signs, bus cards, and share their telephone poles with such other non-authorized messages as rock music posters, activist political messages, and offers of free kittens.

The *Telephone Pole Shrines* are distinctive in their simplicity. The static and symmetrical images are rendered in a decorative graphic style and palette reminiscent of the stylization of folk art. Benign messages are offered, hopeful of being a quiet interlude for passers-by in the street. In one print a bird and a man proclaim a "beauti-

ful day." "Our family" portrays an interracial threesome. "Mind," "might," and "soul" are represented by symbols reminiscent of Mexican melagros. These are secular shrines that carry, by their graphic associations with stained glass and church iconography, a religious quality. The tin frames, though, are as suggestive of the ashtrays we pounded out in summer camp as of the Mexican religious icons they make immediate reference to. Throughout this piece, there is a insistence by Lucker, a highly skilled artist and craftsman, on the immediacy of the homemade, the personal, the non-didactic. This work, which seeks a contrast with the commercial and ideological thrust of street messages is as removed from graffiti as it is from advertising. Writing this far from the site of the work, I can only speculate on the effect on the viewer of encountering one hundred times five personal blessings hung above eye level on the cities' streets. For these collectively, the shrines, the telephone poles, the city that surrounds them form the complete book. Lucker offers this work as a gift to anyone who cares to receive it.

Art, despite the big business environment it has wed in recent years, belongs to a gift economy.* Cultural work (art) is work of the spirit generated from the experience of its maker and given back by the artist to his or her group, be that culture, profession, or family. A monetary exchange does not alter the equation. In any case book artists are in little danger of becoming art stars. Their medium is interactive, one on one, as direct as a conversation. It is in the nature of a freely given gift that what goes around comes around. These books are completed by your reading of them.

Joan Lyons
Rochester, New York,
July 1989

*For further discussion see Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, Vintage Books, 1983



How to Make an Antique is a one-of-a-kind book with video program and custom designed table and chair. The book is 30 pages long, each with an appropriated text center-mounted on hand marbled Rising Stonehenge paper. The text was set on a Macintosh SE personal computer, laser printed, and copied on a Sharp photocopier. A time-line is hand written on the lower edge. The video is a 4.5 minute program continuously looped. Edited at Intermedia Arts Minnesota and Film in the Cities, with on-line edit and A.D.O. special effects at IVL Post through Intermedia Arts' On-Line Program. Architectural images digitized and processed on an Amiga computer by Scott Hayes. 20" Mitsubishi television cabinet altered with vinyl contact paper. Furniture designed by the artists and constructed by Mark Knierim. Cast aluminum leg and other technical assistance by William Malo. All surfaces finished by the artists. 48 x 29 x 60".

Karen Wirth, Robert Lawrence

HOW TO MAKE AN ANTIQUE

How to Make an Antique is a collaborative project between two sculptors, one who works with books and the other with video. The piece arises from a mutual interest in the book and television as mass disseminators of information. Historically they represent the two most radical changes in communication after the development of language itself. The formal relationships between the book and the video set up comparisons to be made by the reader/viewer. By transferring imagery and concepts from one medium to another, the piece reinforces and questions the uses and effects of each medium. The notion of "antiquing" is a tongue-in-cheek metaphor for the contemporary cultural condition wherein history is reduced to a stylistic convention. The disjunctive design of the furniture graphically details these games with history. While the piece does not take a specific critical stance, both the video and the book make playful and provoking associations between such disparate things as acid washed "instant-aged" bluejeans and St. Augustine's discussions of eternity. These and other juxtapositions call into question varying conceptions of time and history.