

Volumes



The work of five Minnesota artists who use books as the departure point for creative inquiry.

BY ADELHEID FISCHER

Critic Lucy Lippard wrote that you can recognize an artist's book "because you've never seen anything quite like it in bookstores or libraries." "Volumes," an exhibition on view in the Minnesota Gallery through April 23, is certainly a case in point. Five local artists, working in media as diverse as painting, sculpture, photography and video, "dismantle" the book, using its history, meanings and physical structure as metaphors or actual building material.

The artists' works fall along a communications continuum that begins with prehistory and ends with the book's revolutionary progeny—television. As a group the works point to a historical "disembodiment" of information, in which ideas are divested of their physicality and relayed through a series of complex electrical pulses, no more substantial than thought itself. Three artists—Harriet Bart, Sandra Taylor and Jeff Wilcox—stand along the earliest end of that continuum, recalling the book's ancient antecedents. Two others—Karen Wirth and Robert Lawrence—look

at what's happened to the communication of culture in the face of the electronic revolution.

Drawing on her reading in psychology, archaeology, architecture and comparative mythology, Bart creates such archetypal structures as walls, spiral paths and shrines. For the last two years, she's used books in these works as both metaphors and construction material, binding and then covering the surface of hundreds of real books with layers of gesso, sand and acrylic paint to make them appear weathered and stone-like. She points out that across cultures, stones often were seen as symbols of endurance and the containers of ancestral souls. Merging these meanings with the functions of books as "time capsules" or "cultural building blocks," the stonebook forms in Bart's works explore her preoccupation with the themes of memory, mark-making and loss. Paraphrasing Mallarmé, she observes: "Everything ends in a book. The book is the repository eventually of everything that we know. To build out of that for me is powerful."

These themes are perhaps most enigmatically put forth in *Forms of Recollection: Stacked*, one work in her tripartite installation that also includes a spiral wall and shrine-like



Harriet Bart uses books as both metaphors and construction material, binding and then covering the surface of hundreds of real books with layers of gesso, paint and sand to make them appear weathered and stone-like. Here, her assemblages *Forms of Recollection: Stacked* and detail of *Forms of Recollection: Stacked* (opposite).



Using commodities charts juxtaposed with newspaper texts, photos and cutout drawings on a pleated, pagelike surface inset into a wall, Sandra Taylor explores the alarming abstraction at the heart of agricultural science and economic policy.

Karen Wirth's fold-out cube *You Are Here* looks at the layered confluence of visual, verbal and physical information in our experience of the world.



assemblage. This rectangle, comprising hundreds of books, towers six feet against a wall. Inserted into crevices are bits of moss, bone, wood, stones and shells that make the work appear organic, weathered and aged. Emerging from this detritus are selected titles scratched into the surface of the books' spines. Such slips of phrases as *Red Snow, Journey into the Blue* and *The Denial of Death* are, like the found objects in the cracks, "found" phrases, like snatches of overheard conversation that become portentous clues to the meaning of the work.

Some of the inspiration for this piece comes from the many walls Bart has visited around the world. Like books, they are witnesses to experience. "They seem to have such a wonderful patina of time," she observes. "They have a kind of *poemness* about them, just as paintings do. You can see a layering of graffiti and time, color and marking. They're like sentinels of history. They seem to have such endurance."

In particular, *Forms of Recollection: Stacked* recalls a retaining wall near a woods in Assisi, Italy, where pilgrims inscribed prayers and pleas to St. Francis on the stones. For Bart, this is the very impulse that gives rise to art and language. "The need to remember that which is no longer present—the people who were powerful, and so we make a mark on a cave, stone, wall. It becomes language through time," she says.

Sandra Taylor also has been fascinated with text. In her work, however, she extracts phrases or paragraphs from more popular sources, such as textbooks and newspapers, that speak to a sense of moral outrage. In one of her earlier, more "traditional" bound books, *In Search of the Average Woman*, Taylor gathered photographic self-portraits of women and on each facing page repeated a sentence she found in a newspaper: "Artificial hearts are too big to fit into the chest cavity of an average-sized woman." Stunned by statements that, because of their neutrality, often escape their readers' notice, Taylor reveals their latent irony through repetition. "You have to say, wait a minute, doesn't that say something, that we can spend zillions of dollars perfecting an artificial heart and it won't fit into half the population?" she asks.

Taylor is exhibiting work from a current collaboration with photographer Linda Gammell and historian Jo Blatti about the farm dilemma. Taylor, a rural-Minnesota native, has watched this decade's growing family-farm crisis take its toll on her own brother, a farmer in the southern part of the state.

Like Bart, Taylor uses wall forms (references, she says, to some of the earliest means for the transmission of culture). On the first, bone-basket boats recall the sacred dimensions

of agriculture using such ancient fertility references as the Demeter myth. Another wall bears personal texts along with photographic images of her brother's farm exposed on a plasterboard surface treated with photochemicals.

A third area, a pleated, pagelike surface inset into the wall, explores secular issues by juxtaposing commodities charts with newspaper texts and cutout drawings. From an article on Dupont's new patented mouse, she extracts the quotation: "We are at the point of making commodities out of everything from the land to the animals that inhabit it." From another on genetic engineering she relays: "Saying that an animal that is genetically engineered can be patented and sold is the official endorsement that animals are human creations, that they are simply commodities and not ours in trust."

With these charts and texts Taylor points to the alarming abstraction at the heart of agricultural science and economic policy. As if to emphasize the organic realities of rural places, the texts are surrounded by the fiery-colored tracings of human hands, forms that simultaneously refer to human and plant life and nature's cycle of growth and destruction. "Most of us live very distant from dirt," she says. "The people who have a lot to say about what goes on in this country are up in towers way off the ground. My work is about the abstraction of some pretty basic stuff."

In Jeff Wilcox's *Summer Solstice Performance*, the book becomes a meaning-filled prop, so to speak, in a ritual drama. Lining the south wall of the gallery is a sequence of photographs documenting a two-hour performance piece that the artist executes on June 21, the date of the summer solstice. At sunset Wilcox begins at the downtown public library (a repository of culture), donning a Plexiglas cube over his head (a reference to the angelic female in early Christian art, he says) and holding the book *Come Winter*. Wilcox reads a text that covers such subjects as the previous winter's snowfall statistics and observations about Stonehenge.

From there he makes a kind of pilgrimage up Hennepin Avenue, pulling a cart that bears a generator used to power a hand-held spotlight. Whenever he spies a lowercase *i*, he draws a circle around himself with chalk and dots the letter with a shot of light. These symbolic gestures recall both that Stonehenge was once a solid wall of chalk and that as the sun sets over its keystone on the solstice it casts an *i*-shaped shadow.

Wilcox concludes his pilgrimage at the former grass lot across from Walker Art Center (another repository of culture), where he darts the book with artificial snow and buries it.

For Wilcox, such monoliths and containers of cultures as Stonehenge, libraries, museums and books provide sharp contrast with the trafficking of daily life as represented by annual variations in snowfall and the comings and goings of life on Hennepin Avenue. The photographs themselves offer documentation of the change. Wilcox has repeated the performance four times since its premiere in 1979, and since then the streetscape has changed dramatically. "I like harking back to the idea of the library as a repository of culture and then to that whole changing flux of life on Hennepin Avenue," he says. "You just get the bombardment, the change and the interaction. And then I'm stopping at the Walker which is another end of the spectrum and in between you've got all this life evolving."

Karen Wirth and Robert Lawrence forgo references to such ancient means of communication in favor of examining the written word's partial usurpation by electronic transmitters of culture. Unlike the linear narratives of books, the television accommodates an episodic jumbling of images and information, a notion that dictates the layout of Lawrence's installation. "It seems to me that making art is about framing multiplicity in a way that you become aware of that multiplicity," he points out.

Layered imagery and word play in his *You Can't Judge a Western by Its Cover* refer to both the myth of the American West and the political contest between the East and West. TV monitors that face opposite walls and flicker without sound are strapped to sawhorses, simultaneous references, Lawrence points out, to the exploration (by horseback) and the building (symbolized by the sawhorse) of the American West. Plywood cacti that can be read as either organic forms or small explosions cover one wall, while the other sports silver spiked or buildinglike forms. What Lawrence calls a "stand-off drama" takes place on a floor of some 600 books. Although many of their titles are obscured, the installation's title is clearly spelled out in the front row.

That the front sides of many of the work's objects are "covered" or hidden is a reference, Lawrence says, to the ways in which words can be used to conceal things. Projected onto a center wall are snatches of glowing-white texts that look at various definitions and examples of the word *cover*, including euphemisms in a recent news "coverage" in which a reporter says that "President Bush promised to 'vigorously pursue' development of a space-based missile defense shield, ex-President Reagan's 'Star Wars' concept." The texts explore



Jeff Wilcox in a photo from his documentation of *Summer Solstice Performance*.

analogous realities, the conquering of the American West through armed subjugation and what Lawrence sees as its duplication in space.

With theater seats that face the installation's back wall Lawrence creates a stage set in which nothing happens. He then encourages the viewers to become the actors, projecting directions for activities or what he calls "scripts for performances." "While watching any television news reports on Central America," one slide suggests, "whistle the theme song to your favorite western movie or TV show. Ask anyone with you, 'Why don't you whistle the theme song of your favorite western?'"

Like Lawrence, Wirth looks at the layered confluence of visual, verbal and physical information in our experience of the world. Her work, an eight-inch paper cube titled *You Are Here*, unfolds as four arms that extend five feet into north, south, east and west directions. Each terminal represents a different destination: a garden, sculpture garden, music pavilion and river. Using the format of an interpretive nature trail, viewers "travel" over a topographical map that examines the ways in which abstractions, such as words, language symbols and reproduced images, become substitutions for real objects.

The north quadrant that leads to a sculpture garden, for example, features exercises in visual and verbal plays on the subject of rocks. Like signposts bearing cues, samples of marbled Formica lead into a succession of Xeroxed photos that begin with a hand holding a rock, to closeups of rocks and finally to microscopic views of rock crystals. Real objects, such as metal pellets, serve as stand-ins for actual rocks. These physical signifiers are juxtaposed with pictures of sign-language symbols and Morse-code dots. "The piece constantly flip-flops between paper symbols and imagery and taking tangible things related to the paper symbol," she says. Carrying these layers of abstraction one step further is a series of slide projections that serves, Wirth says, as an "interpretation" of her interpretation of an interpretive nature trail.

This slide presentation points to one of the most important questions that the entire exhibition asks of viewers. Increasingly, our knowledge of things is several steps removed from any physical interaction with the real world. Rather, we often interact with electronic representations of things. And not only do we receive this information with a greater anonymity but we receive it with phenomenal speed from every corner of the globe. What implications does this have for how we can make sense of the world and the possibilities for effective action within it? □