

The Binnewater Tides

Women's Studio Workshop Press, Volume 8 No. 4, Fall 1991

Also published in the Minneapolis College of Art and Design newsletter as *What Is an Artist's Book*, Volume 5, No. 3, 1993

Indefinite Definition

Karen Wirth

You pick it up. It fits easily in your palm. The elegantly tooled leather is warm against your skin. You open it to a creamy white page. The crisp black letters invite you to feast on the paper's surface. The finely detailed wood engraving on the next page draws you more deeply in the sensual relationship among all the elements.

You try to pick it up. An accordion-folded strip of high gloss paper tumbles out from the covers, making a fluttering whoosh sound as the pages open and close on themselves. Shiny bold-faced words slide across the slick paper, slip over the folds, and puddle onto the last page. You open it more carefully the second time, and your eyes race along with the text to the tangled finale.

You don't even want to touch it. Not just bound, it is bound up, gagged and constipated by the sharp metal bands wrapped tightly around it. The metal squeezes the fore-edges of the cover and compresses the spine in an attempt to hold in the content. If only you had a tin-snips, you could unleash the secrets trapped within.

Is it an artists' book? A fine press book? A book object? A bookwork? A livre d'artiste? Is it a book at all? Is it, or isn't it, who knows for sure?

Apparently no one, but everyone is trying to provide the answers. Pick up almost any book arts exhibition catalog, sourcebook or conference schedule from the past ten years and you'll see it addressed: "What is an artists' book?" It's an issue that just doesn't go away, and I am also compelled to address it in this first column on artists' books.

"Today the term 'artists' book' is a very broad one, encompassing anything from photocopied books...to sophisticated bookbinding that comes out of the European tradition,"ⁱ stated Richard Minsky, founder of the Center for Book Arts in New York. Others are more specific, such as Lucy Lippard: "Artists' books are not books about art or on artists, but books as art. They can be all words, all images, or combinations thereof. At best they are a lively hybrid of exhibition, narrative, and object-cinematic potential co-existing with double-spread stasis."ⁱⁱ Furthering this idea, Gloria Hickey wrote: "Artists' books are for adventurers. In this category every aspect of the book is open to bold interpretation and any artistic device is permissible in the service of expression."ⁱⁱⁱ

Even these specific definitions are loose, and are descriptive rather than definitive. Let's look at that last one again: "...every aspect of the book is...in the service of expression." The object, the book, becomes secondary to something as non-objective as expression. There seems to be no standard to measure against. Sandra Kirshenbaum pointed out

this problem of polarization. “Serious presses have always found their source of energy in the text. This idea of service to the text is one that runs deep in American fine printing. It is also one that conflicts painfully with the idea of the book as a vehicle for personal artistic expression. This is the source of tension between artists who ‘work in the book form’ and printer/publishers who accept responsibility for the fit presentation of text, whether it is their personal expression or not.”^{iv} Just as the idea of placing the book in the service of expression is abhorrent to some, for others so is the placing of artistic expression in a secondary position to standards of book design. Christian Parisot represented this point of view when he wrote, “The elaboration and fabrication of a book involve much more than the rules of typography, deriving from deeper creative sources, making use of chance and accidents that generate new writings and images.”^v But he goes on to make a crucial point: “Though freed from the yoke of industrialized publication, the artists’ book elects to remain a book, and thus remains subject to rules with which it complies, or against which it rebels.”

All this discussion about artists’ books. Assuming that we accept them as a genre, along with these inherent problems of classification, there are two operating root words in the name: art and book. Each of these is a separate, multi-faceted category, and neither loses its qualifiers when combined. Each has a rich and varied history that affects how we examine, question and understand. If we take painting, only one of the many categories of art, and try to define it, the definition would probably not be as inclusive as its history: from cave walls and plaster frescoes, through process and conceptual works, shaped, unstretched, combine- as well as framed easel painting. The last may be the most familiar, but not the most definitive. The history of the book is equally rich and varied, from cuneiform on clay tablet protobooks, papyrus scrolls in mummy-shaped cases, miniature books of hours, William Blake’s monoprint editions and fine letterpress printing, through the beat poets mimeographed chapbooks and Fluxus phenomenological books- all inform what a book is today.

In the past twenty-five years we have seen the loosening of boundaries among art forms. Joseph Stella’s “paintings” of massive welded honeycomb metal hang on a wall; Rebecca Horn’s technological sculptures electronically paint on the wall. As more artists cross disciplines to do their work, more of them are calling themselves “visual artists” because neither they nor their artwork can be easily contained. And many of them are making books, for as many reasons as they make art. They bring to the field the concerns, aesthetics and techniques of other media. That changes our definition of a book. Is it diluted? Some insist that it is. I think that the changes serve to broaden and challenge the field at the same time. As the field broadens, it moves away from what may be the central core to some people. But it doesn’t move away entirely. “Art” and “book” are in the service of each other. “You are making art, so you can be as adventurous as you want or as your imagination will let you. Obviously you need to learn the tools and how the stuff works. ... You start with the concept, but as you develop your concept, the need for the proper tools and skills for developing it becomes critical,” stated Walter Hamady^{vi}. The fields of art and books provide a system of checks and balances within the field of artists’ books. Admittedly, it is a fluid system. But it is that very fluidity which makes the field so exciting.

The Arion Press of San Francisco^{vii} is a good example of a press that combines artistic expression and bookmaking traditions in its deluxe yet experimental limited editions.

Founded by Andrew Hoyem in 1974, the press has issued 27 publications. Letterpress, offset, lithographic and intaglio printing have all been used, depending on the book's mood and content. Creative solutions for the bindings or housings complete each edition. The housing for John Ashbery's poem **Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror**, 1984, is a stainless steel canister, 18" in diameter, with a convex mirror in the lid. The poem is letterpress printed on loose sheets of round, handmade Twinrocker paper. The text radiates from the center of each page, which must be rotated to be read. Eight artists provided original signed prints, including Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Jim Dine, and Richard Avedon. Completing the bookwork is a phonograph record of a reading of the poem by John Ashbery. All elements combine to make a perfect gestalt between contents and context, and between methods and materials. This gestalt occurs in countless other bookworks as well, but not necessarily as deluxe limited editions.

EMPRESS BULLET by Louise Neaderland is a masterpiece of the appropriated text and image, photocopied bookwork. Founder of the International Society of Copier Artists^{viii}, Neaderland is committed to the viability of this art form- not as an "instead of" something else. The grainy black and white images project the immediacy of both the medium and the subject in **EMPRESS BULLET**, named after a riderless racehorse pushed to the edge of the track during a race. The newspaper photo and story are repeated over and over, setting up the horse-hoof rhythm of the race. The sequence comes to an abrupt end, just as the horse does when she impales herself on a railing. **EMPRESS BULLET** and **SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR** may be at opposite ends, but they are on the same convoluted continuum. That continuum also includes sculptural objects that intentionally confront our preconceived ideas about books. In each case the message and medium reinforce each other.

So, given the impossibility of defining artists' books, here are what I consider potent characteristics:

1. No matter where they lie on the art/book continuum, they have elements from each.
2. They deal with images and text in a structure. Even a blank page can be an image. The structure is not added on after the fact, but is integral to the design of other elements.
3. Time, space, rhythm and sequence are internal structures which are also considered in page and object design.
4. Materials, whether traditional or not, are chosen because of the inherent qualities each contributes.
5. Size also contributes to the gestalt. While pres size may be a large determiner, some books may be best as miniatures, others could be room-sized.
6. Care is given to the functional aspects, if it is designed to have any. Inaccessibility may be a part of the content of the piece. If so, it is intentional, not a byproduct of a faulty technique.
7. In some form or another, artists' books deal with reading. The "reading" of an artists' book includes verbal and visual literacy.
8. Ultimately, they are forms of communication. Some whisper in our ears, others shout in our faces, others speak directly to our subconscious. But each has something to say.

A definition implies that there is a preferred usage and meaning. While that may be a helpful guide, often what are more interesting are the exceptions and variations. And at

some point, those many exceptions actually become the definition itself. So it is with artists' books. Enjoy the variations.

ⁱ Richard Minsky was the organizer of *Book Arts in the U.S.A., 1st National Conference*, held in the spring of 1990. Conference proceedings (from which this quote was taken) are available from Center for Book Arts, 626 Broadway, New York, NY 10012 (\$22 postage included.)

ⁱⁱ Lucy Lippard, "Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books," from *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons, 1985. Available from Visual Studies Workshop Press, 31 Prince Street, Rochester, NY 14607.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gloria Hickey, "The Art of the Book, An Appreciation," from *The Art of the Book*, Canadian Bookbinders and Artists Guild, Toronto, Canada, 1988.

^{iv} Sandra Kirshenbaum from *Book Arts in the U.S.A., 1st National Conference*.

^v Christian Parisot, "Color to Words, Form to Writing: The Artists' Book," from *livres d'artistes/livres-objets*, N.R.A.-Shakespeare International, 1985.

^{vi} Walter Hamady, from *Book Arts in the U.S.A., 1st National Conference*.

^{vii} Arion Press, 460 Bryant Street, San Francisco, CA 94107.

^{viii} I.S.C.A., 800 West End Avenue, Suite 138, New York, NY 10025. *Empress Bullet* is available through Women's Studio Work-shop or Printed Matter at DIA, 77 Wooster, New York, NY 10012.