

Talking the Boundless Book: Art, Language, & the Book Arts

Editor, Charles Alexander. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995.

First presented as a lecture at MCBA for a conference by the same title, 1994.

Re-Reading the Boundless Book

Karen Wirth

When I first started writing about books I was intrigued by being part of a thoughtful conversation: examining books by artists, reflecting on their ideas, and representing them to a new audience with other ideas. But it was difficult to decide what part of me would be doing the talking in this conversation. As an artist, I consider my role to be a provocateur, to engage the viewer visually and intellectually.

As a teacher my role is similar, to challenge students to see and think and act, first for themselves, and then in order to address their own viewers. As a writer, it seemed less clear what form of address I should take: challenging, predicting, evaluating? When I started writing reviews for the Women's Studio Workshop in New York, I looked to the teaching model as a way to discuss the work in a critically supportive manner. It is as a teacher that I learned how to select a territory, open it up, and guide the students through it. A critical writer can do the same for the reader.

A teacher is also an evaluator of both projects and progress. This is a difficult and subjective process. Whether critiquing class assignments or reviewing artists' books, comments should be made not to close off possibilities, but to encourage growth. And it is the teacher who knows that it's critical to ask questions, when there may not be answers; to bring up issues to see what discoveries are made in the ensuing conversation.

So it is from this perspective that I will address some issues of critical writing for the book arts, in order to open up the territory and see where we go.

Artists make books for an infinite number of reasons about an infinite number of subjects. Some call themselves book artists, or visual artists or concrete poets, but the common meeting place is the book. And each artist sees the "book" in a different way, as the variety of works in this exhibition [*Art & Language: Re-Reading the Boundless Book*] can attest to. With all these variables, the idea of developing a cogent critical discourse seems daunting.

Books can be looked at as a specific discipline with a history that includes cuneiform on clay protobooks, and a future that includes interactive cybertexts. Within the specific discipline, the book is defined by book arts centers such as this one, artists' presses, book collectors and scholars. But cut free from this sympathetic atmosphere, books are often looked at as a peculiar art form that is not quite like anything else—not quite like books from the regular bookstore, not quite like the art in regular galleries.

When they do make it into museum exhibitions, artists' books are often relegated to the library, away from the normal viewing traffic patterns, and usually subject to shorter hours than the rest of the museum. Reviews might show up in *Artpapers* from Atlanta, or in the *Northwest Review*. Although the mast-head of *Afterimage* lists "photography/independent film/visual books" as its subjects, the visual books they review seem to be limited to those with photographs accompanying text.

Occasionally there is a nod from the New York art press when a famous artist in another discipline also publishes a book, which is seen as a novel addendum to the artist's body of work. To go beyond the art press entirely, the artist has to be connected to a famous author, such as Barbara Kruger's collaboration with Stephen King for the

book *My Pretty Pony*. Even so, it was the publication party and not the book that was reviewed in *The New Yorker* (Feb. 27, 1989 p. 27)

When reviewers from outside the field take a stab at it, too often we are given yet another discussion of how to define books, as if there *must* be a universal canon to which we could all adhere. The issues of the work itself are rarely addressed outside of that narrow discussion.

Within a field that constantly has to define itself, usually by looking at what has been, what is the present? And what lies ahead? We may look to electronic publishing as one path into the future, but critical writing in that field is also burdened by a rehashing of “What is it?” rather than content.

This month’s *Art in America* includes a feature article on the “digital imaging, high-tech printing and interactive video” from the *Iterations* exhibition from Montage ’93. Author Anne Barclay Morgan l-i-t-e-ly relates a few of the works to the social issues engaged by the artists, but the article is generally about the effects of technology on art on the viewer.

There is the ubiquitous reference to Walter Benjamin’s *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: “the word mechanical can send shivers down our spines, as it seems to threaten our humanness.” I’ve read this many times before; there’s too much looking backwards down a narrow tunnel. Ironically, in order to look forward we are asked to look backwards at someone who was looking forward in his own time. Whether it’s artists’ books or electronic books, this kind of reviewing concentrates on global generalizations of a material or medium rather than the specific ideas and methods of the work itself.

Books *are* part of a specific discipline with its material, technological and conceptual histories. This is rich material to draw from. But they also can be connected to broader contexts- whether in the art world or beyond it. The critical writer can place the book *anywhere* in an infinite number of possibilities; in placing the object, there are an infinite number of approaches to it.

For example, *Aunt Sallie’s Lament*, designed by Claire Van Vliet with text by Margaret Kaufman, is about a quiltmaker sewing her heart into her work. There are two versions. One is a limited edition of 150 copies, letterpress printed on a variety of handmade and commercial papers, hand assembled in a complex, variable concertina binding designed by Hedi Kyle, and housed in a custom-made-to-fit clamshell box by Judi Conant. The varying sizes of cutouts on the pages interrupt our reading of the text, so when you turn the pages, different parts are hidden and revealed. The words are a short history of the relationship, complete with lamentations and exclamations. With the interconnections between the binding and the reading, there are both physical and textual meanings to decipher. Recently, Chronicle Books of San Francisco published a trade edition of the same book. It is offset printed in bolder colors on shaped pages with a fixed adhesive binding, housed in a two-piece slipcase. It is the same text, yet it is not the same text. It no longer has the permutations of reading, and the physicality has been reduced—we have a wholly different book here.

We could examine quality and the distribution differences from a marketing viewpoint; or we could discuss the layered texts and the multiple non-sequential readings from a linguist’s point of view; or we could address the communal nature of quilting bees from a feminist stance. Each of these discussions would invite the reader to not only see the book in a new way, but to examine some broader issues that are raised by the work.

Imagining a Venn diagram, with all the things a book can be about in one circle, and all the ways of talking about it in the other. The critical writer figuratively spins them around and examines the intersection. The overlap of the subject and the stance allows

the writer to be specific within the myriad possibilities; it also encourages the reader to question and challenge, and to develop critical responses.

In order to get beyond “what is it?” the writer takes a position and plays it out. Within the infinite permutations between the writer and the object, it is important to be able to locate the position of the writer. Who is the critic, and what is the critical voice being used? In the past month, I have read a poet who said writers make the best critics, a painter who said artists are the best critics, and an art historian who voted for scholars. In my roles as an artist, a teacher, and a writer, I can see that each voice makes a different contribution. But as a starting point it is necessary to have an informed opinion.

What makes it informed? Art or literary history, the history of the book, the biography of the artist, the contemporary art scene, the current art market, or the canon of the medium. There is also the cultural or social context, what’s happening in the news, what might happen tomorrow. It is looking through a variety of filters, each one affecting the meaning of the work. Being informed is about learning, researching and translating.

There are two parts to that phrase: *informed opinion*. An opinion is a particular voice, where one takes a stand. It is possible to write criticism without the introduction of the very personal voice. But too often the words come from a disembodied voice of authority, while ironically claiming to deconstruct authority. The words author and authority come from the same Latin and middle French root word, but they mean very different things. The Oxford English Dictionary, which may be *the* most disembodied authority, tells us that an *author* is: *The person who originates or gives existence to anything; the prompter or mover*. This implies forwardness, or creating new thought to advance a position. The dictionary defines an *authority* as: *one who has the power or right to command or give an ultimate decision*. An ultimate or final decision closes off conversation and discussion. I think it is in conversation that we challenge this field. At this conference, people have presented ideas of books ranging from political tools to interactive communications. Conferences such as this one are part of the educational discussion that expands the genre and its reception.

The questions raised do not need specific answers or solutions—circuitous discussion brings up new questions, and that is how the field grows.

The introduction of electronic books into the schools and the marketplace tells us that the nature of the conversation is rapidly changing. In a recent *Hungry Mind Review*, writer Bridgette Frase develops an intriguing analysis of the painted book compared to the electronic one. She wrote in reference to Richard Lanham’s *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*—available in print or on disk (University of Chicago Press). “The printed page, the bound (codex) book with its title and author page, looks authoritative; it can be described as embodying or containing wisdom in a way the unstable electronic text does not.” In the multilayered, interactive reading of the hypertext the reader is invited to respond directly to the author, to join in the authorship of a constantly changing text. Notions of author and authority become obsolete. This is the contemporary evolution of the reader/response theory, wherein the reader is a wholly active participant in a two-way transmission of information. We may not be drawn to hypertext, but its existence affects the act of reading all types of books.

Books are an interdisciplinary medium. Meaning is not fixed in material or history or format. The fluid movement of ideas from the maker through the object and its message to the reader requires open-minded engagement on both ends. We who are artists and writers continue to make and expand the boundless book; we who are readers and viewers are asked to look anew, to re-read the boundless book; and we who are critics and teachers can challenge expectations and act as guides through an ever-changing, and ever-fascinating territory.