

Text/Messages: Books by Artists, Walker Art Center An Exhibition Review

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With more than 1,600 artists' books in its collection, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis is a treasure trove in an area already rich with collections of books and organizations for book lovers. *Text/Messages: Books by Artists* was an entertaining and educational cache that served as an introduction for a wide audience. Co-organized by Walker librarian Rosemary Furtak and curator Siri Engberg, the show was culled from the extensive holdings of the library and the permanent collection. Some 180 works were on display in the Medtronic Gallery from December 18, 2008- April 19, 2009.

The exhibition took a sampler approach with broad appeal, and was predominantly geared towards an audience new to the field. For the more experienced viewer, it was a reminder of the breadth of the collection, usually locked away in permanent storage (some on view for the first time in decades) or available by appointment only in the library. There were books that may have been familiar only through catalogues, and there were thoughtful juxtapositions of works throughout the installation.

The title of the exhibition cleverly circumvents the various nomenclature and punctuation problems that insiders have discussed ad nauseum—artist's or artists' books, book art or arts. It also averts any overt hierarchy by including a wide range of practitioners and objects from blue chip artists whose books are only one facet of their studio practice to local artists whose sole output is books. It incorporated both historical and contemporary examples, prints and book objects, livres d'artistes and multiples. With all that variety, the full title included the Library of Congress call number N7433.4 .W353 A4 2008, which on the LOC on-line catalogue places the show squarely within artists' book collections, between Franz Erhard Walther's *Organon*, 1983 and Marshall Weber's *Cycle*, 2006.

The frontispiece to the exhibition was David Hammons' *The Holy Bible: The Old Testament*, 2002. The large leather-bound, gilt-edged Bible was housed in a vitrine, its cover propped open to reveal the title page of another book inside: *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, Paperback Edition, Arturo Schwarz*. Essentially an editioned altered book, the work pairs words with The Word, high modernism with a contemporary sense of irony, ideas of the ready-made with an experience of the constructed object, and the tremendous reach of the Bible with the more limited audience of artists' books. Both can be seen as foundational texts. As the introductory work, it sets up a series of dichotomous questions played out over the course of the exhibition: is it a book or an object, is there a difference between an artists' book and a book by an artist, how does a permanent collection differ from a library collection? While the first two questions were discussed by curators in the interest of newcomers, the last question was not, and is more germane to those with deeper connections to the field.

Commingle in this show, both collections feature books by artists whose art is in the permanent holdings of the Walker. And those artists were well represented: 22 works by Ed Ruscha, 18 by Lawrence Weiner, collected works by Dieter Roth. There were also individual works by Marcel Duchamp, Lucas Samaras and John Baldessari, among the many well known names of modern art featured in the show. There also was a Buzz Spector, *A Passage*, and Keith Smith's *Book 91*. Those names suggest a certain bias in exhibition, choices toward the permanent collection's canon and away from the library's quirkiness. The Walker Library, led for 20 years by Rosemary Furtak, reflects her more catholic tastes and strong support of artists for whom books function as primary medium. In a show this broad, a larger selection of works by those artists would have been welcome. The library owns works by Ken Campbell, Clifton Meador, Julie Chen, Claire Van Vliet and countless others that were not seen. There was attention paid to local yet nationally known artists: Jody Williams, Wendy Fernstrum, and Chip Schilling among others. Harriet Bart's *In the Presence of Absence*, is an abstract concept beautifully made physical through laser-cut pages and glass cover. Bart is the recipient of two Minnesota Book Awards for other works not in the show: *The Poetry of Chance Encounters* and *Garment Registry*. Dave Rathman's *Adventures in the Burning Bush*, adapted from Amos Tutuola's "The Palm-Wine Drinker," was a fellowship project through the Jerome Foundation/Minnesota Center for Book Arts and Vermillion Editions. While one can always quibble with curatorial choices, the overall selection was heavily weighted towards works of well-known modernists that have had a lot of exposure and art world recognition. This was an opportunity for getting more artists out of the library and into that larger world.

Many of the books chosen built on past exhibitions or on the smaller-scale and kinetic nature of the book. A couple of examples: Kara Walker's *Freedom: A Fable* adds pop-up silhouettes to her black and white cutouts usually presented oversized on a wall. The intimacy of the book, with the pop-up literally jumping from the page into the reader's space, changes the viewer from outside observer to complicit participant. Difficult race relationships are not just the historical past, but also an ongoing present. In Sigmar Polke's *Daphne (mit einem von Reiner Speck)* photographs of hands pull and stretch images of his paintings into striped patterns, a xerographic version of his paint smears on canvas. Were one able to hold the book, the viewer's hands would become the hands in the photographs, acting on the work in a way that would never happen with the painting.

There were quite a few livres d'artistes, most from the permanent collection, with the larger scale beautiful printing and illustration on fine paper, such as: Robert Motherwell's *Ulysses*, letterpress and etching published by Arion Press, Ellsworth Kelly's letterpress and litho *Un Coup des Des* published by Limited Editions Club New York and Vija Celmins' *The View*, mezzotint and letterpress with text by Czeslaw Milosz, published by Library Fellows of the Whitney Museum of American Art. But equal to these glamorous editions were the ephemeral books by Fluxus artists, who are also very well-represented in the Walker collection: Dick Higgins' "*What to Look for in a Book- Physically*" and *Catalogue 1965-66*, a staple-bound pamphlet, and Yoko Ono's *Yoko Ono's Everson Museum Catalogue Box*, a wood origami-like box containing small cards- "Fold this sheet in half 9 times, John Lennon," or "Painting of 1/100th part of Mona Lisa's Mole, Yoko Ono '61."

Aside from these pairings of types within the collection, there were also intriguing relationships made between works in the installation itself. Just as browsing a library shelf allows for unexpected discoveries within a category, so too the placement of works invited comparative readings. Beyond the aforementioned frontispiece, the first gallery space also included a reading room and the first part of the exhibition. The reading area provided a hands-on experience by necessity missing from the rest of the show, and contextualizing information: how-to books, catalogues, JAB magazine, discursive texts by Betty Bright, Johanna Drucker, and Renée Riese Hubert, a variety of 'zines and inexpensive artists' books. Some of these later could be found for purchase in the museum shop, bringing the show's premise full circle by suggesting to the novice reader/viewer: You too can afford to buy art.

The Ed Ruscha work was displayed opposite the reading area. Fifteen books, almost all of which were shown with the covers closed, and six offset prints picturing those books floating in gray space were displayed adjacent to Rachel Whiteread's *Untitled (Pulp)*, 1999. Whiteread's plaster and polystyrene sculpture was a cast of the negative space of five bookshelves. The colored foreedges of the missing books slightly stained the plaster. There was a formal connection between white plaster and the white covers of the Ruscha, the floating bookcase and the floating book prints. Conceptually, the closed books denied access to the contents of Ruscha's work, while the absence of the books was the point of Whiteread's.

Next was a series of works whose connection was small size and use of containers. Displayed in one vitrine, they could not be read as a curatorial group in any other way. Jody Williams' *In Here, Out There*, is a small book case; the books pull out like drawers. A string ladder ascends to a window, reading as a means of climbing out of one's own head. Then there were three one-liners: Katherine Ng's *Fortune Ate Me*, letterpress fortune cookies in a pink cookie box, Peter and Donna Thomas' John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, with circular accordion pages packed in a tuna can, and two *Gunbooks* by Robert The, found books cut in the shape of handguns. Bookending these works was Xu Bing's *From the Little Red Book of Mao*, a "Message of greetings on 60th birthday of Comrade Yu-Chang" printed on cigarettes encased in a tin box. Because the grouping in the display case was by size rather than content, there was no sense that this last book is part of a significant body of work that deals with the complex web of the tobacco industry, China, the university, and the artist. It is a reminder that this is a large group show in which works are connected by medium, not message.

Other pairings were more poetic. Philip Barber's *Withdrawing* is a woodcut and rubber-stamped book slip, covered in stamped and written due dates. With a few extra letters, the word WITHDRAWN has been turned into WITHDRAWING. Landscape-like, black woodcut bands are printed over the slip, atmospheric ink smudged in what could be read as layers of the sky. Below is Michelle Stuart's *Every Wave Book (For Melville)*, made of earth and linen, sitting on a bed of sand and rocks. Stones are lined up on the cover like rows of white letters. Landscape, text, image are compressed in both of these works.

Sculptural works always present well in exhibitions, as the content is fully revealed rather than obscured under covers in glass cases. Two notable sculptural works were *Obras Escogidas (Selected Works)* by Cuban artist Kcho, and *Notepad* by Sarah Sze. *Obras Escogidas* is a large distressed wood table that supports a boat made from used

paperbacks lashed to a steel frame with twine. Although it is not touchable, the sculpture's physical presence breaks the monotony of viewing many small things in cases. The paperback book covers are the outer skin of the boat; the open pages line the inside. Like non-functional weatherproofing, newspaper is stuffed into any open space. Knowledge of Spanish isn't necessary to understand that covers with titles such as *Atlas de Cuba*, *Historia de Cuba y Sus Relaciones con Estados Unidos*, *Fundamentos de la Fiosofía: Marxista-Leninista* could be read as a socio-political commentary on US/Cuban relations. But both boats and books are also potent symbols of escape and transport to another state of being, so suggested content has to be weighed against historical events such as Mariel boatlift of 1980, or another mass exodus of Cubans in the summer of 1994, the year this piece was made. Kcho's ambiguous relationship with the Castro government could make these interpretations even less clear.

There is no ambiguity in Sarah Sze's *Notepad*, except for the label: offset color litho, laser engraved paper and board. The offset color litho refers to an ordinary blue-lined writing pad, laser cut with a pattern of tiny rectangles. The pad is thumbtacked to the wall. The sheets of paper are rolled and tucked back, tumbling outward from the pad. The cuttings resemble a paper fire escape and landings, with a ladder extending three feet towards the floor, paper snippets in a puddle below. More of a thing than a book, it is nevertheless an exquisite piece made from very ordinary material.

While the exhibition was the centerpiece, there were many collateral events that kept the show fresh over the course of its four-month run. Among the most successful were a film, a library talk, and a book fair. *Lost Book Found*, a 37-minute film by Jem Cohen was screened in another part of the museum. The gallery sign described it: "Mesmerizing documentary inspired by the filmmaker's discovery of a mysterious notebook found while working a pushcart vendor. Its pages filled with obsessive listings of objects, places and incidents, the book influenced Cohen's relationship to NY, and his resulting film sheds light on an underground city, unconsidered geographies, and layered artifacts." The film has a collage sensibility, recreating the memory of the book, while categorizing the city in small quotidian bits and details. Not only is the film about a book, it also reveals its subject like a book.

A Think and a Drink was an evening gallery talk and library show-and-tell that was staged for a smaller group of contributing Walker members. In the library, Rosemary Furtak explained colophons and gave a brief introduction to two types of books, "books that don't behave like books" and more conservative illustrated books, in essence a microcosm of the larger show upstairs. Viewers were able to handle the books and read them as they should be read. This was a new experience for most of the attendees, some of whom actually squealed with delight. Ideally they took their new-found excitement to the *Multiplies Mall: A Bookish Fair*. Tables set up in the Cargill Lounge turned the space into a temporary shop, with artists selling their 'zines, chapbooks, artists' books and multiples. Gallery patrons who had never been to a book fair browsed the tables and chatted with living artists. Idiosyncratic, immediate, and affordable, these works were not vetted through the gallery system or passed through the museum's collection gates. No labels needed, nor white gloves or vitrines. Unusual for an institution such as the Walker, and more commendable for the same reason.

Text/Messages was a terrific introduction to the field of artists' books, perfect for a new audience but without challenge for a knowledgeable one. It was also a great showcase of the artists represented in the Walker permanent collection, but missed an opportunity to expose other artists in the library collection. Nevertheless, museum shows like this are rare. Here's hoping that the next one builds from this foundation, assuming more audience sophistication, and challenging them through curatorial risk-taking.

<<http://visualarts.walkerart.org/detail.wac?id=4665&title=Current%20Exhibitions>>

Karen Wirth is an artist and educator whose work has been exhibited extensively, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Walker Art Center. Her book works include offset editions, sculptural pieces, and large-scale installations, all of which led to public art. She is a professor and Chair of Fine Arts at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Wirth has received numerous grants, including the fellowships from the Bush and McKnight Foundations, National Endowment for the Arts, Minnesota State Arts Board, and MCBA/Jerome Book Arts. She is a founding board member of the College Book Arts Association.