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Artists' books

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The artist's book is a book or book-like object intended to be a work of art in itself, and over the appearance of which an artist has had a high degree of control. But artists, seeing this definition as yet another medium to explore, constantly challenge it, pushing the book format in unexpected directions. The artist's decision to choose the book rather than film, performance, painting or sculpture is crucial: why have they elected for the book format and how have they used it to convey their intentions?

Historically, despite attempts (mine included) to fabricate a pedigree from William Blake and William Morris, the artist's book had its beginnings in the experiments of the Russian avant-garde before and during the Russian Revolution. Whatever caused this extraordinary flowering - alphabet reform, a reaction to the deluxe productions of Symbolism, the urge to address a new, wider public, the breakdown of censorship - Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Kamensky, Burliuk and Lissitsky anticipated most of the 20th century approaches to the book format: their books are collaged, hectographed, lithographed, printed on wallpaper, on newsprint, on gingerbread (Chicerin) etc. Kamensky and Burliuk's extraordinary *Tango with Cows: Ferro-concrete Poems* (1914), printed on the reverse side of wallpaper, with its leaves having their top right corner cut off, contains diagrammatic poems with words, letters, numbers, symbols and punctuation marks. Less than ten years later, El

Lissitsky's constructions for Mayakovsky's *For the Voice* (1923) showed how innovative Russian avant-garde book design continued to be: the double use of letters on the title page, a thumb-index with 'summary' symbols, a full use of the typesetter's repertoire, red and black ink, and so on.

Although individual futurists, Russian and Italian, such as Eliazd or Munari, continued to experiment with the book format, the artist's book was largely dormant until the early 1960s when, for a number of reasons, there was another upsurge. These reasons included new and cheaper methods of reproduction (duplicator and photocopier), the conjunction of printing with fine art in art schools, and an eschewal of the deluxe and decorative in favour of conceptual art, art-language and the constellation of movements and ideas that Lucy Lippard characterised as 'the dematerialization of the art object' in her *Six Years* (1973). Itself a sort of bibliography, Lippard's book catalogues activities - land art, performance and artists' books - that set out to evade the gallery system and the unique, saleable art work on which it was dependent.

It was ironic that the artist's book would later be commodified by the gallery. The fourth entry in *Six Years* is for Edward Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). This is a leperello (a potentially infinitely extendible accordion folding), housed in a metallic silver slipcase, of photographs of the Sunset Strip, Los Angeles. It reads from left to right at the top edge, from right to left on the bottom edge, as if a car is making the return journey, a sort of narrative boustrophedon (literally 'ox-turning writing'), almost insisting that the book be inverted. The images are deadpan and relate to some of the photographs of large sections of New York streets commissioned by estate agents e.g. John Veltri or Todd Webb's *Sixth Avenue between 43rd and 44th Streets, New York* (1948). In an interview with John Coplans in 1965, Ruscha insisted that his photographs imitated the effects of industrial photography: 'one of the purposes of my book has to do with making a mass-produced object... my book is more like a collection of "readymades"', and indeed the publisher's imprint was often the appropriately named 'Heavy Industry Publications'. Ruscha also made unusually large editions, often having a reprint: *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* was first published in 1963 in an edition of 400 copies (numbered, somewhat contradicting Ruscha's stated ambition), in a second edition of 500 unnumbered copies in 1967 and a third of 3,000 in 1969, whilst *Crackers* (1969) was published in an edition of 5,000 - 'all are reprintable' - and Ruscha claimed that they were distributed through supermarkets and drugstores.

Ruscha was one of many artists who used the book format in the 1960s and 1970s: conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt, Fluxus and related artists like Dick Higgins, George Brecht, George Maciunas, Wolf Vostell and Daniel Spoerri, concrete poets such as Ian Hamilton Finlay and Simon Cutts, 'land' artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, and less easily categorised artists such as Bruce Naumann, Dieter Roth and Christian Boltanski. And many of these artists maintained a vigorous output of books into the late 1990s. Today, the making of artists' books has become institutionalised: it is taught in art schools (making a suitable project for the modular curriculum); you can study artists' books at postgraduate level, and

write PhDs about them; there are artists' book fairs and book shops, exhibitions, auctions and web portals. Can artists' books still tell us anything?

Controlling the reader

If in the history of the manuscript and printed book, artists have re-asserted control over the finished book, they have also recognised that the reader need not be cast as a passive receiver. Citing the work of composers such as Stockhausen, Pousser, Boulez and Berio, Umberto Eco has argued that scores are 'open works' completed, if only temporarily, by their performance. Similarly, artists have made books that have allowed the reader to determine their final form and even their destruction. Keith Godard's *Glue Glue* (1973), with Dow Corning silicon adhesive blobs on the cover, has its pages glued together: Godard insists that the pages should not be physically separated until that particular copy 'has its ultimate owner' who could create 'torn designs by pulling the pages apart, thus completing the book's concept'. *Lay Text* (1993), by the Bologna-based American artist, Angela Lorenz, requires the reader to don the latex gloves provided in the miniature clothes bag in order to extend the latex sheets which contain compacted text only visible when stretched: the reader seems to become physically part of the medium. And without the gloves the 'book' becomes invisible or at least materially vulnerable.

Anselm Kiefer's large lead books might survive an atomic holocaust but require several people to turn each page, proposing a different author/reader relationship: it is the author/artist who prescribes what pages are seen at a particular time. At the opposite extreme, flip books such as Kevin Osborn's *Real Lush* (1981) or Daniel Jubb's *Bookcase* (1993) surrender control to the reader who can start anywhere or flick through from back to front as well as front to back at any speed.

Supposing one wanted to make a book that took twenty-four hours to read? Arguably James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) had such an ambition: the Irish broadcasting station, RTE, *Bloomsday* reading took 26 hours. There are various strategies, beyond being obscure or overly concise, which slow down or speed up the reading of the text. The Western reading convention is from left to right, top to bottom: anything that destabilises or challenges this will inevitably reduce the speed of comprehension. *Boustrophedon* involves writing and reading from left to right, then back from right to left, on alternate lines: this slows the reading process. Similarly, text spread down columns slows the reading. Dick Higgins's *foew&ombwhnw* (1969) - or, as we all know, 'Freaked out electronic wizards & other marvellous bartenders who have no wings' - has four 'stories' in four columns per page, intended to be read page by page rather than in linear columns. The column itself is an hereditary overhang from the proto-book, the scroll and sits uneasily in the printed book.

The typographer also has a range of techniques that slow down or speed up 'reading'. A large typeface usually speeds up reading (at least there is less on the page), but type which is too big - as in Dieter Roth's *Gesammelte Werke: Band 10: Daily Mirror* (1970), which has massively blown-up extracts from the eponymous newspaper - is read with the greatest difficulty. Very small or

imagistic type again slows down the reader who might have to resort to a magnifying glass - or the magnifying 'bug box' lid of Irene Chan's miniature *Book of the World* (2000). Altering the space between words, letters and lines has consequences for the reading process: running the words together or separating and evenly spacing each letter disturbs the reader's expectations.

Who is the audience?

The relationship between artist and 'reader' was dramatically problematised by Daniel Spoerri's *L'optique moderne: collection de lunettes* (1963), a Fluxus edition designed by George Maciunas. The book comes with a pair of glasses with nails attached on the inside, pointing into the reader's eyeballs. If this proposes the closure of the book and the invisibility of its text, other artists have proposed a less hostile relationship: Verdi Yahooda's *The Dancer* (1984) comes in a black cloth wrapper with elasticated thread - at least I have always assumed that this was an intended, intrinsic part of the book. Immediately, there is a sense of a shared privacy: the reader, alone at its reading, is allowed to examine the small photograph album of gold captioned photographs, the contents of the jewellery-box atopped with the figure of a dancer, the supposed property of the artist's mother. Nancy Holt's *Ransacked* (1980) uses the book format's resemblance to doors to entice the reader into Aunt Ethel's house: shared intimacy becomes, in this case, akin to voyeurism.

Price and scarcity are two undeniably determinant factors in what sort of audience the artist might expect. The precious, expensive book will disappear into museums, libraries and the collections of the rich. Matthew Higgs' series 'Imprint 93' established a folded A4 format, centrally stapled, with artists such as Martin Creed invited to accept the parameters of this format: but the books are given away, mailed to friends and other artists. That ubiquitous presence in the office, A4 paper, popularised by that great agent of reproduction, the photocopier, is the basis of Tony White's Piece of Paper Press (POPP), founded in 1994. Eight pages are imposed on each side of the A4 paper. One hundred and fifty copies are then made in a copy shop. It is then folded three times to give a 16-page A7 booklet, a small octavo, which is usually trimmed and stapled twice through the central gutter. A third of the edition is distributed by Tony White, a third by the artist/writer, with the remaining fifty held in the project's archive. Both POPP and Imprint 93 defeat many of the common assumptions of limited edition book distribution. Ironically, there is no way to totally defeat the system and many of the productions of both 'presses' have value in the artists' book market. In such a context, Maurizio Nannucci's encouragement of the reader of *Art as Social Environment* (1978) to tear out its perforated pages, which had the title printed on each, and discard them as litter or propaganda, or Davi Det Hompson's instructions for the reader of *Disassemblage* (1966) to crumple and ignite, may have meant that the fewer surviving copies have increased their rarity value.

Narrative

At the heart of the artist's relationship with the reader is narrative. However paratactical (i.e. employing co-ordination rather than subordination) the

construction, if there is one piece of text next to, before, or after another, the reader desires to connect them, to make a story. Marysia Lerwandowska and Neil Cummings' *Lost Property* (1996) provides a staid black and white photographic catalogue of lost objects handed into the London Transport Lost Property Office on one particular day - toys, roller skates, clothing, false teeth and prosthetic devices - compiled in the style of a museum catalogue. Each object demands a narrative: how did it get there? Was it lost or abandoned? How did the little girl with one left shoe get home? How was the child who lost the fur mouse on the 23rd February 1995 comforted? Have some of these objects been serially lost - like the 'baton' fate of the gun in Marcel Carné's *Hotel du Nord* (1938). These objects are the props of everyday life, drenched with personal associations but apparently divorced from narrative context: this endows them with a super-charged valency, an undirected and unfocused sentimentality. Yet the demand for narrative overwhelms the deadpan labelling and photography: are these all props of plots, clues to crimes? Could they all belong to one person?

Narrative, as we have seen, is not confined to written text: one image next to another sets up a metonymic chain, the 'reader' carrying some memory of an earlier image. And even the format of the book can have the same effect - George Maciunas' *Flux Paper Events* (1976) is a blank book (except for its cover). However, the pages have been crumpled, smeared, torn, stapled together and folded. The top right corner has been guillotined off (perhaps referencing Tango with Cows) whilst the bottom left hand corner has been drilled through the whole book. This parodies book production itself: most books are made by folding imposed and printed sheets of paper, bound at one end with the outer edges trimmed square. It is also a Fluxus event, encompassing and making into one, a series of seemingly random actions.

Text Production

The frustration or delay of narrative closure results from some of the 'slowing' techniques described above. For the formalist critics of the 1920s, such as Victor Shklovsky, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67) was the locus classicus for the discussion of ostranenie (or defamiliarization), laying bare the traditional methods of narrative. Sterne directly addresses the reader, frustrating the narrative flow by digressions on knots and noses, black and marbled pages, gothic fonts and squiggly lines depicting the narrative line. Was *Tristram Shandy* an artist's book? The answer must be no: the artist's book is made by an artist, who has decided that the book format is the appropriate medium to convey an idea. The artist might decide that writing or, less grandiosely, text production is that medium. Using an existing text is one such strategy, and this 'text' need not be a literary one. Fiona Banner's *The Nam* (1997) is a seamless, unindented transcript of her shot by shot voice-over of six Vietnam War movies: 'Mike leaves off with one arm and turns round to wave at the chopper. It's coming down, closer, so black...' The six different narratives become one, the montage of film is remontaged. Sarah Jacobs' *After the Years of Misrule* (2001) takes Conrad's novel *Nostromo* (1904) and represents it, changing the word 'but' to 'because' in one part, reversing this in another, etc. Her *Unknown Masterpiece Drawing Book* (2002), puts the Balzac text, so iconic for modernism, through a series of free-software translations,

degrading it in meaning and visibility. Jaroslaw Kozlowski's *Reality* (1972) takes the section so entitled from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and removes all the words, leaving only the punctuation marks, laying bare the pausal and structural conventions of the passage. There are other possibilities: removing words, collaging bits of different texts to form one whole (like Walter Abish's '99', a so-called autobiography constructed from other people's autobiographies).

New text can be constructed by devising rules which then have to be executed: Dan Graham's 'Schema for a Set of Pages' in *Aspen no 5-6* (1967) proposes a formula for a series of works infinite in variability: '(number of) adjectives (number of) adverbs (percentage of) area not occupied by type...'. Karen Rhymer, 'writing as Eve Rhymer', produced *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* (1996) for Sara Ranchouse Publishing, Chicago, where each chapter consists of words beginning with A, B, C etc. These suggest interesting comparisons with OULIPO (Workshop for Potential Literature) and the text-generative experiments of Raymond Queneau and Italo Calvino, or the lipograms of Georges Perec, (all of whom were influenced by Surrealist games).

Success and failure

What does the artist's book tell us about the world? In the sense of 'defamiliarisation', it should lay bare the medium itself. I choose four artists' books that for me are successful. Coo Geller's *Cell Book Two* (1995), a limited edition of 20, uses an embossing process on a leperello (an accordion fold) which also opens page by page: a red cell becomes two and geometrically multiplies until the last pages are incarnadined, completely red. Is this a metaphor for growth and creation, the reception of increasing information as one reads the book, attaining full knowledge and closure; or, is it a malignant virus-like multiplication, the closure of which is death? Yoko Terauchi's *Ebb & Flow* (1988) is a single sheet, silk-screened red on one side and blue on the other. A tear across the whole sheet allows it to be read page by page or extended into one (two - as it is reversible) opening red and blue gash, with the white 'flesh' of the paper exposed. The economy of the idea and execution are exemplary. The cut of the recto/verso - what happens between the right hand page and its reverse, the left hand page of the next opening - is a feature of the book that has been exploited by the artist. Susan Hiller's *Rough Sea* (1976) is a series of anonymous postcards depicting rough seas; the turn of the page acts as an analogue of wave movement, the swell, tow and undertow of the sea. Michael Snow's *Cover to Cover* (1975) consists of 360 (as in 360 degrees) pages of photographs, where recto and verso mirror one side of the object photographed and then the other.

If the only thing the artist's book succeeds in doing is to make us look again at the 'ordinary' book - the train station book shop novel or the stationer's invoice book - and question why each should be the way that it is, it will be doing an important task. Hence its value in the educational process.

Stephen Bury is the Head of European and American Collections at The British Library, with responsibility for the Map and Music Libraries and the Philatelic Collections. His books include *Artists' Books: The Book as a Work of Art, 1963-1995* (1995) and *Artists' Multiples 1935-2000* (2001), and he has contributed articles and reviews to *Art Monthly*, *Times Literary Supplement*, amongst others. In 2001, in collaboration with Matthew Higgs, he led an artists' books workshop at Tate Modern. He is also a trustee of Matts Gallery and the Chair of the Trustees at Book Works. He recently contributed to the exhibition *Private Views* at the London Print Studio Gallery; *Bibliomania*, a web project; *Football Haiku* and *Libraries of Thought & Imagination* (Edinburgh: Pocketbooks); and the international touring artists' books show '(Of Volumes) of vulnerability'. He is a PhD supervisor at Chelsea and Central St Martin's Colleges of Art & Design. Stephen Bury can be contacted at stephen.bury@bl.uk

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