A Preface
by Dick Higgins

THERE IS A MYRIAD of possibilities concerning what the artist’s book can be; the danger is that we will think of it as just this and not that. A firm definition will, by its nature, serve only to exclude many artists’ books which one would want to include.

Given that caveat, let’s try for a grey, rather than a black and white, definition. I’d suggest: a book done for its own sake and not for the information it contains. That is: it doesn’t contain a lot of works, like a book of poems. It is a work. Its design and format reflect its content—they intermerge, interpenetrate. It might be any art: an artist’s book could be music, photography, graphics, intermedial literature. The experience of reading it, viewing it, framing it—that is what the artist stresses in making it.

The illusion is that it is something new. Not so. Blake’s most visual books are obvious early artists’ books. But probably there have always been some of them being done. They didn’t begin with Blake in the late eighteenth century. But many were lost, and many nearly lost. For example, these might include the not-so-strange but certainly unusual books of André Bayam, a Portuguese from Goa in India, who worked in the early seventeenth century. His language was Latin and he used it as part of his flow, not for the sake of making powerful works but for the sharing of joy, as artists are so apt to. Most of his books were made in miniscule editions and most copies are lost. Perhaps they should be reprinted, starting with the Panegyricus sine verbis de s. Philippia Nerii laudibus, dictus in eius celebritate Urbe Veteri in maiori basilica anno 1629… (Urbe Veteri: ex typographia Rainulfo Ruuli, 1629)—“A panegyric without words in praise of Philip Nerii, spoken in his celebration at Urbe Veteri in the big cathedral in the year 1629…” One would like to know just what was spoken—sound poetry? Something like sound poetry was in vogue at the time, as was pattern poetry, the visual poetry which our learned professors have been hiding from us all these years because it confuses their neat pictures, but that’s another story. Anyway, the importance to us of knowing of our brothers and sisters doing artists’ books and such-like in earlier times is that it tells us that what we’re doing is not some weird modern eccentricity “for specialists only,” but a perfectly natural human expression. It gives us continuity with other times and cultures.

Of course, looking towards modern times, the “books” (sometimes called “non-books” too) of Dieter Roth and Bern Porter in the 1950s are also artists’ books, as anyone knows who visited Porter’s show at Franklin Furnace in New York City ca. 1981, or the various big shows of Roth’s books in London, Amsterdam, and elsewhere in the 1970s. So, what we have is a form which is not, per-se, new, but whose “time has come.” And what this means is a matter of audience more than of artist. Not that artists’ books are being done in production runs of 10,000 copies, but the genre is now defined in some way. There are stores and outlets for the books and, as a result, the perception of the artist’s book has changed from it being an eccentricity to it being an integral part, sometimes central to an artist’s work—the main medium of expression, and sometimes an important venture for an artist whose main concern lies elsewhere. We see an artist’s non-book work, and we say, “Gee, wouldn’t it be interesting if so-and-so would do a book.” And maybe so-and-so does.

Perhaps the hardest thing to do in connection with the artist’s book is to find the right language for discussing it. Most of our criticism in art is based on the concept of a work with separable meaning, content, and style—“this is what it says” and “here is how it says what it says.” But the language of normative criticism is not geared towards the discussion of an experience, which is the main focus of most artists’ books. Perhaps this is why there is so little good criticism of the genre. Besides, where would it be published? Traditional art magazines are too busy servicing their gallery advertisers, and the focus on the book experience is not what the critics are used to doing anyway. “What am I experiencing when I turn these pages?” That is what the critic of an artist’s book must ask, and for most critics it is an uncomfortable question. This is a problem that must be addressed if the audience for artists’ books is to continue to grow, if they are to reach a larger public.

But it will happen. The making of artists’ books is not a movement. It has no program which, when accomplished, crests and dies away into the past. It is a genre, open to many kinds of artists with many different styles and purposes, and so its likely future is that it will simply be absorbed into the mainstream and will be something which artists do as a matter of course, each in his or her own way. To that we can look forward with delight.