Evaluating Artists’ Books by Harry Reese

"Art is the attention we pay to the wholeness of the world."
Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination*

I. "What criteria and standards must work stand up against when submitted to galleries, juried exhibitions, for grant proposals, award competitions or any other professional arena?"

I cannot think of any consistent criteria or standards that apply to any art selection process, and especially to competitions requiring an evaluation of artists' books. The competitive selection process—for juried shows, grants, and competitions—is normally determined either by a review committee or by a single person. In any case, someone has to like the work. Contemporary artists learn sooner or later that, as Dave Hickey says, the prime material of the contemporary artist is not paper, pigment, canvas, or wood, but the expectations of the beholder. To say there are no standards in art today is to miss the point. Each gallery, exhibition, publication, competition, or graduate program has its own expectations, along with the personal agendas and tastes of its committees and jurors. One surprising feature of consumer society is not, as some would predict, that art has been driven by commerce, but that commerce has become so artful. Book artists who knowingly engage in commerce—in other words, those who are successful—are fully aware that art is not a quantifiable commodity. It is a medium of exchange, with extreme fluctuations in immediate or future value. Most artists I know, who are still making art, have already discovered a particular supportive community for their work. Whether they make paintings, sculptures, books, or embroidery (and I know artists who do well at all of those) they would not survive as artists without the support of a small community who likes their work and does something about it. The support structure for the artist determines the relative value of the work. Artists who have not established a community to support their work have some important, formative work ahead of them. There is no formula for successfully establishing a supportive community for art. The context of an artist's work, then, includes not just how or why it is made, but also what happens to it when it leaves the studio. It is my experience that art is not purchased or ranked highly in competitions because it meets selective criteria; it is chosen because a more or less important person thinks it is better than its competition.
II. "What are the things that a jury looks for? What makes a jury pay attention to your work?"

The answers we are looking for are usually formed by the questions that are asked. Although I do not have much to do with juries, here are some questions I ask of artists’ books:

1. Were the intentions of the artist successfully realized?
2. Does it contribute anything new to the field?
3. Is there a compelling tension between technique and ideas?
4. Do I enjoy looking at it?
5. Has this artist taken risks that make the work more interesting; or has the artist made predictable solutions that, however competent the work might be, make it less interesting?
6. Do I appreciate this work as much after viewing it as I did when I first looked?

Books have always been a very conservative medium. I am most interested in artists' books that show me something new, that engage my imagination, and that bring together image and text in thoughtful, humorous or provocative presentations. I am drawn to the work of artists who explore the form and format of the traditional book, develop innovative practices, extend technical inventions, and present contemporary issues. As far as all contemporary art work is concerned, I am easily pleased, but not very often.

Artists' books frequently merge traditional media, and in doing so they mix the reading of text with pictorial and tactile experience. There are still a great many viewers who do not like "to read" art. In spite of that, whether produced as unique artifacts or in multiple copies, artists' books have created a different kind of public and private viewing, and a new audience for these artifacts. The intimacy of the artist’s book and the experience of reading allow for the viewer to participate in a novel way, to become part of the content of the work of art. With artists' books, the question of what constitutes a great text will not be decided only by literary experts. In an artist's book, visual recognition is as important as textual identification.

IV. What factors are taken into consideration and what different standards apply when looking at different genres of bookwork?

A book is different from other forms because it exists in time as well as space. It has different requirements because it cannot be seen all at once. Book artists who understand how to use the visual space of the picture plane of the page attract my attention. Leadership in book arts belongs to those who firmly understand the
traditions out of which books are made, but push the material and metaphorical limits of the form. Contemporary book artists bring together the traditions of the book with the innovations of modern and contemporary art.

Contemporary book art has no intrinsic qualities outside of its received form. Determinations of value are projected onto it by its admirers. Book art breaks down divisions between information and storytelling, between high and low conceptions of art, between art and life, and exposes the raw nerve of beauty, utility, function, and purpose that turns archetypes into clichés and back again. The book as a form allows artists to use private reflections within an intimate presentation.

The rise of artists' books can be explained in many different ways, but certainly one of them has to do with a longing for tactility. Tactility primarily involves the sense of touch, but it incorporates all of the other senses. Each sense creates its space. We learn through the fingers and hands in ways we cannot investigate otherwise. Constant touch is not tactile. Tactility is the resonant interval, what is touched and let go. How an artist understands tactility, and uses it inventively in the book form, continues to interest me. For example, Raymond Queneau's lines in *Cette Mille Milliards de Poèmes* (the 1961 Gallimard edition, designed by Robert Dassin) both communicate and represent the potential of touch once you realize that each line creates a new poem whenever it is turned. You do not have to turn all the lines to grasp the humor and the potential of this book. Walter Hamady's latest *Gabberjab* is a tour de force of visual typography that challenges conventional ideas about the structure and function of books. Hamady's books, like so many good books by artists, are learning experiences about how they were made. Every touch reveals something new, about the book and its reader.

V. "How do we evaluate our own work and the work of our peers with fairness and dignity?"

When I began making books intently in 1975, I was already familiar with this saying: "When a pickpocket visits a holy man, he sees only the holy man's pockets." We see the world in terms of our desire. I entered the world of books through poetry, principally through writing, reading, and looking at it in print. The design, printing, and book forms I studied were not exclusively fine press, nor were they artists' books. Artists are constantly retrieving models from the past, without knowing or even attempting to know their antecedents. Discrimination is the essence of consciousness; we evaluate everything we see, everything we touch, everything we do, regardless of how well informed or experienced we are. Nothing can stop us from having opinions and making judgments, whether they are fair or not. We should also keep in mind Ad Reinhardt's observation that "artists' disease is a hardening of the categories."
I knew how to make art long before I knew how to see it, and I suspect that many others feel the same. I knew how to make art long before I knew how to evaluate it, too. I did not know then how to evaluate my own work, not just because I had not made enough of it, but because all I knew how to look at was what I had recently seen or just had done. I had to break through a private fog of learned assumptions about art, not only to make sense of the contexts in which different standards are applied, but also to recognize and respect different ways of seeing. The simple fact is that not all artists want to be fair. Art and language are our primary instruments for refusing to accept the world the way that it is, for exercising personal agendas and putting them into recognizable form.

Charity begins at home. When I think of "a dead art," I do not think of a traditional medium (such as painting) that has been made obsolete by a newer medium (such as photography). The art is "dead" when artists practice the medium without studying it thoroughly. "Dead art" can be practiced by anyone, regardless of how fair, balanced, or dignified their critiques might be. I project my standards based on the context in which I view my work at a given time. I do not like to hang out with jerks, no matter how brilliant their art might be. But will I show their work to my classes? Will I look at it myself? Of course, I will, if it's good.

"If it's good, it's art; if it's not, who cares?" said Pablo Picasso, one of the largest egos and greatest artists, in this century. My aspirations for making books invariably change as I learn more about book history, more about art practice, more about what I want to do as an artist. There is no substitute for learning about your medium. Any fair or dignified evaluation of work made today extends from a strong comparative sense of what artists made in the past, a grasp of what was both traditional and innovative in other times, and a generous acceptance of risk and its rewards.