

## **The Tactility of Artists' Books** by Harry Reese

"Art is the attention we pay to the wholeness of the world."

Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination*

My primary creative work for the past twenty-four years has centered on the imaginative possibilities of the book as a vehicle and container of thought, emotion, communication, and pleasure. During that time I have been directly and indirectly involved in a range of creative projects which include writing and reading poetry, making paper and prints, painting, writing essays, and participating in public art projects. But most importantly, the focus of my work has been on the hand technologies of making limited edition and unique books.

My experience in making books can be traced to significant relationships, both with the people I publish and those with whom I work. When I started Turkey Press in 1974, I was a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at Brown University. I entered into the world of making books through poetry, principally by writing, reading, and seeing it in print. After taking a typography class at Rhode Island School of Design, I taught my close friend David D. Cooper how to set type, and together we taught ourselves to print. The modest books and printing we produced were an extension of our friendship with others, and our growing respect for the tradition of the book made by hand. The epigram at the beginning of *Unknown Friends*, my book of poems that David printed in 1976 as an expression of his appreciation for my bringing books into his life, reflects an attitude that has continued over the years: "No matter how isolated you are, or how lonely you feel, if you do your own things diligently and conscientiously, unknown friends will come to you and seek you out."

In 1977, Sandra Liddell Paulson (a known friend) and I moved to Isla Vista, where we were married and established our present home/studio of the past twenty years. The following year I began teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara, first at the College of Creative Studies (where I established an undergraduate Book Arts program in 1985 and a major in 1988), and later at the Department of Art Studio (where papermaking and book arts are studied at the graduate level as well). Teaching has given me the unique personal opportunity to research the history and traditions of books along with an immediate exposure to the most current contemporary art practice.

In twenty years of teaching I have observed a dramatic turn, especially at my university in particular, in the appreciation for the book as an art form. Prior to meeting with my first class in 1978, I asked the Provost for advice on how to title the course. "Give it any name you want," he said, "but don't call it bookmaking. That sounds too much like Las Vegas!" The course was titled, "The Art of the Book," since I wanted the students to learn about the books they were making by studying how books had been made in the past. The production of books has always been an art form to some degree. But the making of books has now become a legitimate exercise for all artists, in all disciplines. Book art exhibitions occur frequently—from student shows (in particular, from my "Book as Portable Sculpture" classes to individual and group exhibitions of internationally known book artists). Book artists regularly give lectures, workshops, and demonstrations of their work. There is a distinct pattern we can follow in human information technologies as they have evolved and developed over time: the new technology turns the old technology into an art form. In the book arts, new technologies for typography, printing, and the electronic display of images and texts have cumulatively conferred upon the hand produced book a greater value and a higher recognition.

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 is the common-sense meeting place of all of the senses. Each sense creates its space. We learn through the fingers and hands in ways we cannot investigate otherwise. Constant touch however, is not tactile. Tactility is the space of the resonant interval, what is touched and let go. When we touch books we bring together materials and ideas. We find a way to touch words, visual impressions, and feelings. Language is our primary medium for describing both our experiences of the world and our refusal to accept its terms. The form of the book demands close scrutiny at a short distance. Through all forms of portable sculpture, private picture planes, and tactile resonance, artists' books link the senses together.

Artists' books often merge traditional media, and in doing so they mix the reading of text with pictorial and tactile experience. Whether produced as unique artifacts or in multiple copies, artists' books have created a different kind of public and private viewing. The intimacy of the artist's book and the intense isolation of private reading allows the viewer to participate in a novel way, to become part of the content of the work of art. All of the aspects of the making of a book determine how it will be experienced. A book exists in time as well as space, and its sequential nature requires that it cannot be seen all at once.

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. Artists' books remind us that while the book as an object presents a visible form and specific structure, the experience of the book is always determined by the reader or viewer. The content of the book is not only what is written or pictured within the book, but also what the reader creates as a result of the encounter with the work as a whole.

While studying the development of artists' books, I have also taken close inspection of the cultural ground in which these developments have occurred. This investigation has led me to become, in recent years, an unreconstructed media ecologist. If "ecology" is recognized as the study of the organism within the environment, then media ecology can be seen as the study of media (all extensions of the body) with the environment (where media is located). Electronic media by definition is not in any one place at a given time, but by its own nature of electrical impulse travels on an alternating current between positive and negative poles. It can be viewed as an environment in itself.

Artists who use the book form are creating an anti-environment in the midst of the electronic wind of the information society and its consumer culture. The surprising fact about art today is not that it has been driven by commerce (which we all know to be true, at some level), but that commerce has become so artful. Because art is so easily transformed by the electronic environment, artists need to be aware of the world they are living in. We live in a world that is becoming more visual. It is a man-made environment which at one extreme threatens to isolate the senses. At the other extreme, electronic media offers a future promise of uniting speech, vision, knowledge, and touch in a new perception of tactility. With the leading edge of technology providing a seductive and interactive blur of light, color, and sound, artists who work in the trailing edge book form today intuitively sense the need to touch their own work, and for it to be touched by others.

My personal experience of making books by hand, along with the unusual opportunity of teaching the handmade book in the age of electronic reproduction, has allowed me to examine closely one of the most significant artifacts humanity has developed. The book art projects that we patiently controlled by hand production at Turkey Press over the years have provided us with a practical learning laboratory in the arts of the book. With each book project we have attempted at least one new design idea or technique—at least it was new to us, whether it was a

new binding approach for Sandra or a new printmaking experiment for me. We have insisted upon controlling the means of production simply because we thought it was better to work that way.

Our work has been called "small press," "fine printing," and "artists' books," depending upon who was talking and which book they were describing at the time. As one who suspects, along with Ad Reinhardt, that "artists' disease is a hardening of the categories," I know from my experience that books ultimately convey their own unspeakable language to the solitary reader. The investigations, applications, discoveries, and personal relationships that we made along the way have always seemed as important to us as the books we produced. Just as George Braque credited cubism for bringing art within his capabilities, we realize that our apprenticeship to learning about the nature of books and how to make them by hand has brought art into my life and into Sandra's as well.