“Artist’s Books and the Burning Question”

27th annual conference of the Southern Graphic Council at Arizona State University in Tempe by Karen Kunc, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. (March 1999)

Here I am, crowded into a packed lecture room, sitting on the floor, at a session of the 27th annual conference of the Southern Graphics Council at Arizona State University in Tempe. We are all here in great sympathetic company to hear presentations about “Artist's Books of the 90's” by panelists Sandra Kroupa, the Book Arts Librarian at the University of Washington, Seattle; Helen Frederick, Director and founder of Pyramid Atlantic, Riverdale, Maryland; and Harry Reese, Professor of Art, University of California, Santa Barbara. The size of the underestimated audience indicates the burgeoning interest in the book arts throughout America by a wide range of artists in all disciplines, growing out of printmakers, papermakers, photographers, poets, calligraphers, graphic designers and craft artists. It was a distinct pleasure to be in the audience that day among other book art aficionados, some well known - such as Enid Mark, Maritza Davila, Barbara Metz, Mary Phelan, Anita DeAngelis, John Risseeuw - and others new and eager to see what is currently happening. And, I suspect, to come to their own understanding of the burning question - why artist's books?

The panel didn't exactly debate what artist's books are, having taken the past discussions about definitions, the different categories, and various historical links as resolved and accepted. The operative definition for Sandra Kroupa is ultimately "pretty big!", allowing for all possibilities to be equally embraced, as a very open medium, including as many variations as there are artists, and approaches from the traditional to the inclusion of digital technology practices. Instead, these presenters introduced new work by some new and well-established artists, following the connections through various teachers, while advocating the "experiential nature" of artists' books, which understandably the slides were unable to adequately convey. The presentation echoed the interest of the audience to see challenging and unusual new work.

At that same conference I presented a demonstration of various book binding structures that I have used over the years in my own bookworks, some learned at workshops, other methods developed on my own or adapted, following principles that recognize printmaker's concerns, such as the possibilities for display of the work, self-production, knowledge of book terminology, and print technology problems. Judging from the intense questions, demands for specific information and general interest, and the eager hands to handle the models and finished books I brought with me, the possibility of the book form for printmakers is a strong direction to yet further expand printmaking into related areas and alternative formats, which seems to be an exciting option for many.

Now I seek to address the question - of why artist's books? - because it is posed to me so often, by students, curators, university administrators, librarians, friends of the book, printmakers. Perhaps in this examination I am not exposing anything new but offering my own viewpoints that can see broad interrelationships. And I do not intend to re-cross territory so well addressed by others with recent books and articles addressing related theories of visual culture, communication semiotics, definition nuances, discovering little known forebears of the book
field, which can often be quite didactic. What I can do is make a clarification of why I think this is happening and describe the various streams out of which this movement has grown.

Everywhere I go, as a visiting artist, as a conference participant, or casual gallery visitor I am seeing artist’s books/book-works/books as art. More than half of the invitations I receive to exhibit my work have been to book shows in the last few years. Everywhere I go, as a visiting artist, as a conference participant, or casual gallery visitor I am seeing artist’s books/book-works/books as art. More than half of the invitations I receive to exhibit my work have been to book shows in the last few years. There is a sense of this medium having "arrived", with museum interest, traveling shows with catchy titles, trendy themes for publications and craft books, workshops, maturing educational programs. And still the burning question "why book arts?" We all must be seeking our own understanding by asking everyone else for their own justification! And yet from my reading of artist’s statements, very similar explanations are offered by all - primarily these always include the tactile qualities of work made for the hand, the control of pacing and the "reading/viewing" as an experience, an interest in story-telling, and strong, important historical and cultural associations.

Obviously to me, the book arts movement that we have now accepted grows out of a number of postmodernist approaches. First is the issue of sequentiaility - a way to present an idea that relates to other parts, that one part to make the point - a process that grows and evolves, requiring more of moving from one to the next as a form of 'reading', and saying something thoroughly. Related to this way of thinking, I believe we have grown accustomed to a 'cinematic' flow - the permutation of our culture with video, film, TV, with media controlled sequence and narration; the book can play similarly with physical movement, as a non-static form with simple technology. Next the acceptability of 'appropriation strategy' in art, which recognizes and uses the artifacts of our printed world - pre-printed images from commercials, illustrations, throw-away sources are re-examined, re-contextualized through a collage aesthetic, which acknowledges the printed source as primary communicator of truth and illusion. Also, the postmodern era has adapted current technological means - all new methods are used for a simulacrum, a standing in, allowing for a 'slickness', evidence of 'reality of making' that blends into the larger world - digital imaging possibilities, offset availability, copy machine access, even the authenticity of the hand-printed mark which produces convincing publication values and tests reality and meaning. Another point is the postmodern examination of text and meaning, text as image, with questions of the most essentialist distillation of communication, with books historically the carrier of textual mysteries. Finally, this era has led to the examination of all communication means - written, visual, audial, tactile - and media sources as the means of dissemination. The book sits squarely with the other technological forms of film, video, tape, vinyl, computer, light and wire transmissions, while it is the most historical.

Yet still fresh for many are the traditional book issues that artists are experiencing, examining, deconstructing. First, is the narrative structure, as a physical sequence of pages, controlled pacing and reading by the maker, yet open for "random access" for further relational and unexpected experiences - the book falling open for a portentous reading. Second, is the idea of the book as a container, holding artifacts themselves, archaic information, preservation of memories, stories, images, object collection - a selected whole world. Important as well, but discredited in this age of "ironic attitude", is the love of materials discovered in the making of
book objects - an awareness of paper, ink, proportion, colour, relationships, finish, detail, all parts to the whole, with evidence of craftsmanship; making an aesthetic object, even a beautiful one, as a carrier of important ideas, worthy of preserving, with reverence, meant to enhance the intimate experience of "reading". Significant is the personal relationship to this book object - a controlling of time, space, movement, involvement in a physical place, in a physical way; unlike other art objects, books "feel right' in the hand, and it is a known relationship from our earliest days of learning, reading, discovery. Finally, there is the issue of image and text again, but perhaps without skepticism or questioning of meaning, but as a conveyor of ideas, with an appropriateness of design and readability, in context with images for decoration, embellishment, even illustration.

The recent manifestation of book arts derives from various feeder streams, aside from the larger art historical backgrounds one could cite, such as the fine press or private press movement and the 'beat' era poets which offered a literary emphasis and alternative publications for select learned readers; the arts and crafts movement; graphic design and typographic constructivists; the Fluxus artists' ephemeral collections of detritus; and pop art send-ups of low popular arts vs. high art.

One such stream is obviously sculptural object-making, with artists using the book as a cultural icon, with books that cannot be opened, which are bound up, literally wired or pasted shut; book forms carved from solid stone. These works are uncommunicative as books, but powerful as metaphor. Another stream comes from current fascination with personal identity issues - books that work as journals, scrapbooks, offering a self-identity examination that is decidedly "diaristic", revealing. As an outgrowth from the feminist art movement, such "writing of one's own story" often gives voice to the "other" in society and perhaps has even initiated the present day celebration of multicultural pluralities. These identities are hidden inside books yet revealing in content, where artists/authors can tell their own narrative without editors and publishing houses. Also, book arts are a beneficiary of the search for alternatives to the "exclusiveness" of the art scene, and of the development of alternative sites for exhibitions and work sites, as well as the artist's cooperatives of the 1980's, with the book form as the ultimate self-contained exhibition alternative, bypassing publishers, curators, jurors; with portability, easy transport, exchange, reasonableness in scale and cost; artist's books are seen as an alternative form itself, yet understandable, one in which everyone can related to the playful changes and challenges made to an intimately known form. Finally, there is a stream that I call "retro - humanistic," which is an instinctual acknowledgment of the need for hands to "make," to construct objects from scratch, to have power in one's hands to make a form that we know is culturally significant and classical. This ability is directly counterpoint to the distance of the machine, the screen, the increased immobility and illusion of our computer age, and the contrary isolation and depersonalization of our disjointed mobile society. It acknowledges a strength that is in our being to shape the world with our hands.

In America the book arts movements have largely been outside academe, in the workshops, not-for-profit co-operatives and centers that have grown up as places for continuing arts - non-programmatic, offering weekend concentrations, summer "get-aways" to learn something "hands-on", often following after or along with the trends of the handmade paper movement that grew in the 1970's. Important centres with proven longevity - 25 years or so - are the New
York Center for Book Arts; Pyramid Atlantic in Riverdale, Maryland; the Minnesota Center for Book Arts in Minneapolis; the Chicago Center For Book and Paper Arts; the Women's Studio Workshop, Rosendale, NY; Pacific Center for Book Arts, in San Francisco; and Nexus Press in Atlanta, Georgia, to name a few. Several of these institutions have recently announced exciting plans for new permanent homes through building purchases, indicating the commitment and support of members, including artists and patrons. A vital aspect to many of these independent art centers has been “internship residencies” for emerging artists, as well as publication awards for artist's books, which help to foster growth, experimentation and opportunities for artists. Also, there are a large number of summer crafts programs which include offerings of book arts courses, some of these include: the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina; the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine; Art New England, Bennington College, Vermont; Anderson Ranch in Aspen, Colorado; and the Paper Book Intensive held at a different site each summer. New places for courses are continually popping up, such as the book artist Daniel Kelm recently instituting workshops at his studio in Massachusetts.

Within the academic setting there have been strong and important programmes at institutions, often established around a particular professor, and moving into programmatic structure and permanence over the years, often with related areas of conservation practices and research. Several to mention include the University of Wisconsin in Madison with professor Walter Hamady, now retired, but immensely influential for his innovative work and also through the generations of his students who are now teachers themselves. Also UWM houses a working historic press under library auspices, The Silver Buckle Press. The University of Iowa Center for the Book has always had strong literary connections with the renowned writers workshops, and the imprint of Windover Press, under the direction of Kim Merker, also at Iowa is the papermaking lab and research of Tim Barrett. The Visual Studies Workshop of the Rochester Institute of Technology has focused on the integration of the photograph, graphic design and high technology for a distinctive quality of media scholarship. Columbia University in New York offers a Rare Book School in the Library programme for research. Other diverse books arts programs are at Arizona State University with John Risseeuw; the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, with Steve Miller, and the University for the Arts in Philadelphia with Lois Johnson, Mary Phalen and Hedi Kyle the latter is the well-renowned innovator and teacher of book structures. Regionally the book arts in the Bay Area of California benefit from artists Betsy Davids, teaching at the California College of Arts and Crafts, and Julie Chen, at Mills College, both in Oakland. At the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Bonnie O'Connell carries on and expands upon the important legacy of her predecessor, Harry Duncan, who was recognized as a pioneer in modern letterpress printing, espousing the aesthetic of the "crystal goblet" relationship of design elements in service to the text.

At many other institutions the book arts are often integrated into printmaking areas, as a natural extension of the expanding definition and function of the print, such as at the University of Oregon with Margaret Prentice, and at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, Portland with Barbara Tetenbaum. And at other institutions, such as the University of Idaho with Tom Trusky, book arts are seen in graphic design areas, as an integrative and practical component of structure and text, yet experimental, inexpensive and low tech in the spirit of the 1970's.
I have also enjoyed watching a number of individuals oil the pinnacle of the movement in America that are important to mention, such as Joanna Drucker, for her theoretical dialogue in writings and compilations that examine the book in culture and language, as well as Buzz Spector, also one who writes critical thinking on books and creates pithy bookworks and collage objects. Susan King has explored the autobiographical narrative in her writing and book forms, with structures that create conceptual travel metaphors. Artist Timothy Ely, follows an illuminated manuscript tradition, making elaborate unique books full of his otherworldly paintings and drawings. Equally interesting to me are those not known as book artists, such as Chicago sculptor Margaret Wharton, who early on physically dismembered old books for her constructions reminiscent of shrines, allowing for playful references to the context of the books and her forms. Hot artists from New York, Kiki Smith and Leslie Dill often consider text, sewing and ephemeral paper as part of their visual form, creating strings of words/poems, and each recently producing collaborative book projects. Book artists also become part of larger opportunities that have taken the notion of words off of the page and into site specific context, such as Harry Reese’s commission for lines of poems to be imbedded onto the stairways leading into the new public library in Los Angeles, and Claire Jean Satin uses alphabet tiles from historic languages for comparison of linguistic origins in public art in Florida. Brad Freeman, who began over ten years ago as a pressman/artist has evolved into the publisher of the new Journal of Book Arts (JAB), creating an important new forum for critical writing, documentation, and information. Finally, both Keith Smith and Gary Foster have elevated the range of options for all artists with their research work on book structures and extensive manuals.

There is a great sense of interconnectedness within the fairly small group of artists, teachers, theorists, students in the book arts world - including many others that I have not mentioned here. Conferences have been formed at various times to specifically address book arts, creating opportunities for dialogue, where issues can be addressed about the directions of the field, how to keep programmes that are under pressure, developing the next generation of practitioners and teachers, and the inevitable affect of technology and the electronic component on the field, and the evolving role of the book in our society. Recently printmaking conferences have also included book arts issues as part of the formal dialogue that occurs at a slow but regular pace among membership groups that are very generally regionally based, but open to all.

I believe there is also an obvious trendiness to artist’s books now, with everyone trying their hand at literally "binding tip a book" for inaccessibility statements on the one hand, to playful variations of binding structures and craftsmanship of content-less blank books. Museums and galleries are fueling this trend as well, joining in initiating publishing ventures of richly made tomes by marrying famous artists and texts, notable craftsman and presses, such as projects for the Whitney Museum of American Art Library, and adventurous works published by Granary Books in New York, and commission awards to book artists made by the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC.

The effect of this focus in some areas, and integration in others is that there is a groundswell of interest across America. In every national print competition one can see artist’s books, perhaps entered as a challenge to the parameters of the traditional definitions of the print, and then tell to the jurors and galleries to contend with the display and categories. Young masters students are choosing to make artists books, most often they are printmakers making an alternative
formal for presentation, and arriving at an integrated, cross-disciplinary understanding of their ideas and book arts in context, with a fascination for the tactile, and the open alternative such work presents.

As I write this in spring of 1999, I know of the impossibility of keeping tip with all that is happening around the country, to know all the new practitioners, and the wealth of work being done. My impression is of the great interest, and many levels of involvement that represent this natural rise of interest, that has grown out of so many streams, feeding the soul of artists and audiences, raising compelling contemporary issues, and firing tip initiative, possibilities, integration of disciplines. This is the burning excitement and the ultimate rationale that renews the book as art for me and so many others.

Karen Kunc is Professor of Art at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She holds an MFA from Ohio State University and a BFA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Kunc has made bookworks for over 20 years at Blue Heron Press in a career that parallels and expands her work as a printmaker. Her books and prints have recently been exhibited in solo shows at the Women's Studio Workshop and at the Atrium Gallery, St. Louis. Group shows include: Artist's Books of the 90's, University of Missouri, Kansas City; Dressing the Text: the Fine Press Artist's Book, Art Museum of Santa Cruz and national tour; Art of the Book '98, touring through Canada; Califia Books, San Francisco. Her bookworks are in the collections of the Victoria and Albert National Art Library; The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; the New York Public Library; the Walker Art Center; the Library of Congress; the National Museum of Women in the Arts; the Allen Library of the University of Washington, Seattle. Her prints are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, Finland; Hafnarborg Institute of Culture and Fine Art, Iceland.

• This article appeared in Grapheion 10, 2nd issue, 1999 (European review of modern prints, book and paper art) Czech Republic, pp. 13-19

• A web-based version, with photographs appears on seven pages, starting at: http://karaart.com/prints/articles/kunc/artists.books.1.html