

What you can do with an Artist's Book

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ABSTRACT *What you can do with an Artist's Book* is an art project that maps the new role of the “artist as researcher” onto current developments in the book arts—an experiment in re-description that sees studio work in the context of a practice-based inquiry. It relies on the theoretical framework proposed by Graeme Sullivan and uses his approach to re-imagine an expanded curriculum for both the study and teaching of what is now called the book arts. From the beginning, but certainly in today’s post-secondary “climate of outcomes,” the visual arts have looked for ways to justify themselves in terms acceptable to the wider university culture. Rather than simply being dictated by this necessity, re-describing visual arts as practice-based research may be the answer to this long standing desire as well as the natural outcome of putting the studio in the proximity of the lecture hall and lab. Within visual arts itself, book arts have, for the most part, only been taken up piecemeal. This hesitancy, outside of the normal nervousness of established departments to a perceived challenge, reflects definitional tensions within the field itself. *What you can do with an Artist's Book* proposes that these tensions can be made productive as part of a re-evaluation of the role of the artist and a re-conceived book arts becoming an ideal site for such an expanded research inquiry—an art that now knows how to preach what it practices.

INTRODUCTION This research project is undertaken with an understanding that the book is under considerable pressure from digital initiatives to transform publishing, production and distribution. It has also been undertaken with a knowledge that post-secondary programs in the book arts are trying to come to grips with what this might mean as the book is re-conceptualized. *What to do with an Artist's Book* is an art project and research effort that seeks to do several things: understand the new conditions of the book; show why artist's books can vitally contribute to this understanding; experiment with the role of artist-researcher as an important new possibility for visual arts practice; and see how all this can suggest a new curriculum for the book arts.

BACKGROUND In North America, starting in the Sixties but establishing itself through the Seventies, was a growing desire for artists to engage with, and make books. And, as diverse as the reasons for this interest might have been, a community started to take shape through the publishing of newsletters and journals, and through the founding of centres for holding workshops, mounting exhibitions, making equipment available to artists, and printing and distributing work.

Some of these publications have been crucial in creating that sense of a shared community. *Umbrella* was started in 1978 (until 2008) by librarian Judith Hoffberg as a newsletter catering to artists making books. She saw this new development emerging out of Fluxus practices, and in this sense she didn't feel the need to distinguish this production from other forms of contemporary art making. Unlike later, more specialized journals, issues of

the newsletter announced a wide variety of art events, situating books quite comfortably within the larger art world. Artist and printer Brad Freeman began *JAB* (The Journal of Artists' Books) in 1994 (still being published). It reflects a more mature discipline attempting to understand its own premises and features a collaborative and experimental approach to each issue. *The Bonefolder* (an e-journal for the bookbinder and book artist) which has been issued since 2004 by bookbinder Peter Verheyen, represents a further development where material and technical concerns have been foregrounded instead of (or in some cases alongside) more conceptual ones. Centres have also played an important role in early community building. Starting in the early 1970s, artists were given access to printing equipment and skilled printers at The Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. The Center for Book Arts in New York City was started in 1974. For distributing artists' books, Art Metropole began in Toronto in 1974 and Printed Matter in New York in 1976. The Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild was founded in Toronto in 1983. These were the beginnings of an uncoordinated but expanding (including post-secondary) interest in the book as an artistic medium.

With this growing self-consciousness also came the desire to define what this type of art-making amounted to. Many of these doctrinal and definitional debates were explored in Stefan Klima's 1998 *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*. Klima does an excellent job in giving a bird's eye view of the critical writing on book art but seems almost disappointed that these disputes were never resolved. Two of the most important figures in his survey, and well known as major contributors to the debate, were writer and curator Clive Phillpot and artist and scholar Johanna Drucker. In his essay "Books by Artists and Books as Art," published in the catalogue to the 1998 show *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books*, Phillpot articulated what he called a "spectrum" of contemporary practice. The areas that he identified as relating to artist book production were: magazine issues, magazine works; assemblings and anthologies; writings, diaries, statements and manifestos; visual poetry and wordworks; scores; documentation; reproduction and sketchbooks; albums and inventories; graphic works; comic books; illustrated books; page art, pageworks, and mail art; book art and bookworks. This taxonomy is wide-ranging and shows an incredible

diversity of means and approaches. He privileges structural descriptions and is most at home with work exhibiting a dominant conceptualism. Johanna Drucker's 1995 seminal study *The Century of Artists' Books* has perhaps cast the longest shadow over these considerations. Her attempt at circumscribing the field is less terminological and shows more interest in motivational concerns. A list of her chapter headings are: the book as democratic multiple; as rare and/or auratic object; the codex and its variations; self-reflexivity in book form; as visual form; as verbal exploration; the book as sequence (narrative and non-narrative); as an agent of social change; the book as conceptual space (performance and exhibition); as document. Some of this could be adjusted to coincide with Phillipot but much of it seems better suited to a different approach, one that includes a basic interest in the conditions of materiality and that wants to know and acknowledge what is involved in artistically initiating a project. Drucker declared that she was only really interested in this as a revisable first step in building a foundation for future work, and although her book is often used as a classroom primer, its critical framework, like Phillipot's, has only been sporadically and partially adopted. In 2005, scholar and curator Betty Bright wrote *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960–1980*, a very nuanced, historically based narrative, showing a great sensitivity to the traditions of letterpress. But Bright, rather than finding a way to build on these previous taxonomies, relies instead on her own minimal structure: the fine press book; the deluxe book; the bookwork; the multiple bookwork; the sculptural bookwork.

What interests me here is not adjudicating between schema but rather, observing the formation of critical terms. What has to be avoided is (and debates around definitional clarity always seem to yearn for) a premature and limiting consensus, instead of what I believe should be a productive disagreement. This may be unsatisfactory to scholarly tidiness, but I think it is important to keep the tensions at play, for these are the stakes of a re-considered book arts. Some of these tensions can be accounted for by the uneasy admixture of a craft imaginary and sensibility (lying somewhat outside contemporary art theory and tracing a longer history) and the Conceptual and Fluxus movements that made the first artist books imagined as such. My project hopes to show how this can be made productive. I have

been a bookbinder and book artist for 20 years. My background is in the fine arts and I distinctly remember realizing, as I was being drawn into book making (something I experienced almost physically) that I was leaving an art community for a craft community, with a different social scene, different galleries, different funding, and that this wasn't simply a matter of self-description. I then discovered that in addition the book was trapped somewhere between the regard of the library and the gallery with neither able to do it justice or sure of whose purview it fell under.

CURRICULUM I have been trying to understand the implications of this limbo-like state while teaching both book design and book arts at the university level for the past seven years. One way my students and I have tried to come to grips with this has been to imagine a revamped curriculum for the study of the book arts. What kinds of study and practice would this new educational model call for? What follows is just a beginning.

READING Few students describe themselves as “readers.” I often have to get them to think back to their childhoods to remember what an encounter with a book can be like. Works like Alberto Manguel’s 2010 *A Reader on Reading* reflects passionately on what is at stake. In their 1999 study, the Huberts (Renée Riese and Judd D.) call artists’ books “the cutting edge of reading” and exploring the implications of this statement is where any study has to begin. What kind of edges do we find when we go looking? This is a reading that includes all the resources of the textual but also examines it as part of a semiotics of the image and a hermeneutic of the object. The image, with the word, with the object—this confrontation is the first that has to be addressed by the book artist. Writers were some of the first to test these barriers with experiments in Concrete Poetry (eastern calligraphy also shows how these distinctions might be confounded). The “Liberature” movement in Poland is just such a book art expression developed by writers. In reply, visual artists will have to take up writing. This suggests that literacy in the book arts should always be a transliteracy (see the Transliteracy Research Group). And an expanded sense of the hermeneutic import of reading along a variety of newly discovered edges will help us negotiate the artist’s book as it enacts these spatially and temporally.

HISTORY The book arts need to come in contact with the general history of the book and follow it as it changes through time and grows out of local material

and social cultures. There are excellent bibliographies showing the extent of the work already done, for example, Allison Muri's "Selected readings on the history and 'future' of the book" at the University of Saskatchewan (www.headlesschicken.ca/eng204/bibliography.html). A study of this nature shows the book to be exceedingly adaptable. Ivan Illich's *In the Vineyard of the Text* (1993) is a commentary on a twelfth-century guide to the art of reading—Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*. For me, Illich's book was crucial in establishing the important lesson that reading is historically situated.

The screen, the medium, and "communication" have surreptitiously replaced page, letters, and reading. I deal here with the beginning of the epoch of bookishness which is now closing. I do so because this is the appropriate moment to cultivate a variety of approaches to the page that have not been able to flourish under the monopoly of scholastic reading. (p. 1)

More recently, book-scholar Bonnie Mak in her *How the Page Matters* (2011) follows the reception of a Latin text as a manuscript, as a printed book and as a digital edition.

The page is an expressive space for text, space and image; it is a cultural artefact; it is a technological device. But it is also all of these at once. The ensuing chapters will explore the page as a careful integration of physical and cognitive architectures by using a hybrid approach adapted from methods that have already been established in different disciplines to study the book and book-related issues. the following discussion combines the tools of palaeographers, codicologists, art historians, literary critics, and new media theorists to examine the complicated synthesis of rhetorical, intellectual, and physical elements of the pages of a fifteenth-century treatise. (p.18)

The kind of pursuit outlined by Mak should be of extreme interest to book artists.

THE SENSES Books are kinetic and intimate, held in, and activated by the hands of the reader. This proximity, where we become physically involved, opens the possibility of an erotics-of-the-book. Book artist Buzz Spector muses "page turning is a series of gentle, sweeping gestures, like the brush of fingers on a naked back" in his 1995 *The Book Maker's Desire*. Embodiment, tactility; these will have to be included as part of our imagined curriculum. A lot of work is being done on the revaluation of the senses. There is philosopher David Abram's shamanistic investigation *The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world* (1997) as well as Mark Paterson's *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (2007). Also of interest is the work of philosopher Richard Shusterman's development of "somaesthetics". Book artists will find any ideas around the issues of embodiment

germane to their practice.

THE OBJECT Here we cover a variety of new, promising, and speculative examinations of objects and material culture. This includes writer and theorist Bruce Sterling's *New Ecology of Things* (2007) where he examines new relationships with objects tagged with RFIDs (radio frequency identification) as well as political theorist Jane Bennett's 2010 *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* that attempts to chart the agency of materiality and its political consequences. It would also have to consider Object Oriented Ontology (a recent philosophical development out of Speculative Realism, itself very recent) through the work of philosophers Graham Harman (*Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*)(2005) and Levi Bryant (*The Democracy of Objects*)(2011).

CODING "The book is a dead medium"—statements like this usually elicit agitated cries for immediate resuscitation, or triumphant cries for a well-deserved interment. If this statement (and Marshall McLuhan) is correct, then this means that the book is now rightly in the hands of the artists (where all defunct media wind up). But this doesn't mean that art making is inherently anachronistic. Book artists see both digital and analogue cultures as different imaginaries which may be put to rhetorical use. Both are part of their toolkit. But they also need to study and critique computer coding and the various markup languages it utilizes to better understand how these procedures go about parsing reality.

DRUCKERGATE In the spring 2005 issue of *The Bonefolder*, Johanna Drucker published an article called "Critical Issues/Exemplary Works." This was a polemical jab aimed at what she saw as the community's self-induced marginalization. She wrote: "Because the field of artists' books suffers from being under-theorized, under-historicized, under-studied and under-discussed, it isn't taken very seriously"(p. 3). She called for (despite the problems and objections) a canon of artists and a critical and descriptive terminology for book arts aesthetics.

My criteria for judgment about what constitutes an interesting artist's book are simple: is this an original work of art that makes creative use of the book format? Beyond that, other questions arise that I ask of any work of art. Does the work make experience or perception into form in a compelling way? Does it move my understanding from one place to another? Does it distill the essence of a perception or experience into form? Does it open the door of imagination or insight

or make a significant argument? Does it fulfill the terms of the problem set by the artist? Was it an interesting problem or initial idea? If so (because if not I'm not even going to go on) then does it do this in an aesthetically compelling way? Aesthetically compelling is not the same as beautiful. Or well-made. Or highly produced. Finally, what kind of dialogue is created within the book, among its elements (page to text, image and text, paper and ink, binding and innards, gutters and margins, etc.) And what conversation is it having with the broader sphere of art, of life? No formulae apply here any more than in any other realm of art. Most challenging of all is the question of translating these observations into scholarly and critical work.(p. 4)

In an appendix, she also outlined a “proposal for a critical approach to meta-data for artists books.” This reflected her recent work with Jerome McGann on a variety of digital humanities projects at the University of Virginia’s SpecLab (see Drucker, 2009). She imagined (rightly, as it turned out) that this call for a new critical apparatus would disturb the community’s sense of inclusivity—it had gotten used to a non-judgmental life at the margins and Drucker’s challenge “touched a nerve.” The discussions that ensued on Book_Arts-L listserv came to be known as “Druckergate.” While most of the vitriol can be disregarded, the resistance itself (which wasn’t complete by any means) cannot be simply labelled as immature. It recognizes the organic growth of the community and its support base. It is unconcerned with artworld status or scholarly regard, and it recognizes, and aligns itself with DIY and a “making-and-doing culture.” Media theorist David Gauntlett ‘s 2011 *Making is Connecting: the social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* examines this kind of approach, and sociologist Richard Sennett’s important *The Craftsman* (2008) re-evaluates the world of materials and the skills of the workshop. These are of ongoing interest to many book artists who remain unsure of what does, or should, constitute their practice.

- MY PROJECT** *What you can do with an Artist’s Book* is a work in 3 parts; a unique object, a published work, and a digital archive. This tripartite structure is meant to track the book arts across a variety of platforms and allow for a reading of such things as materiality and embodiment, publishing and dissemination, cataloguing and archiving.
- UNIQUE OBJECT** Here we explore what philosopher Nelson Goodman would call the autographic. Its “originality” suppresses what is often considered the book’s most defining characteristic—its multiplication through reproduction.

This specific origin is all about the work of the hand and the body in concert with the mind and the current status and meaning of “making.” Drucker would place this object under the rubric of the “auratic” (with decided nods towards Walter Benjamin). Suppressing its reproducibility, its utilitarian regard, allows the book to display its embodiment (and to make us self-conscious as equally embodied). Reading becomes performance in a gradual experiential unfolding.

PUBLISHED WORK Publishing is where we imagine the book to have achieved its most radical cultural effects. I’m going to keep a critical diary and notebook to document the project as it proceeds and this will be produced as a POD (print on demand). But being in the artistic midst of things, and additionally aware that these notes are in effect field-notes, means that I have to bring to them a new experiential sense of myself as researcher as well—looking over my shoulder and trying to make some sense of it. Susan Sontag in her essay *Against Interpretation* (1966, p. 7) warned “to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’.” This is why I prefer Paul Ricoeur’s somewhat chastened hermeneutics where meaning is smuggled back and forth (translated) across a border at some risk to one’s selfhood (see his *On Translation* of 2006).

DIGITAL ARCHIVE I am a research assistant on *The Yellow Nineties Online* (1890s.ca), an initiative of Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra at Ryerson University’s Centre for Digital Humanities. This has made me particularly interested in the digitizing and dissemination of historical and contemporary cultural materials. Johanna Drucker’s interest in this has already been mentioned. While at Virginia she started *Artists’ Books Online* (www.artistsbooksonline.org) an “online repository of facsimiles, metadata, and criticism” where she was able to test her ideas about the possibilities that building this kind of resource, and understanding the challenges in how to describe (tag) things, poses for critical thinking. I plan to create my own online archive using the open source platform *Omeka* (omeka.org) to house all the sundry materials related to my project. This puts “the book” into the widest possible distribution network and it creates its own kind of reading environment for humans as well as machines (with the kind of metadata destined to participate in creating the hoped for Semantic Web).

ARTIST-RESEARCHER Attempting to cross so many platforms, *What you can do with an Artist's Book* is as much an intervention as a specific work. In this it crosses the aesthetic thought of curator Nicolas Bourriaud with the art-as-research espoused by theorist Graeme Sullivan. Bourriaud, in his work *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) showed that many contemporary art practices made little sense without including the relation that the work sets up with its public. More recently in *The Radicant* (2009) he has recognized that as artists in a globalized economy we are forced to “practice translation and organize the discussions that will give rise to a new common intelligibility” (p.188). These ideas imagine an artist doing a different kind of work and revealing a different kind of reality—acting on a global stage for those that will pick up and put those actions into circulation. I believe that Bourriaud’s attempts to describe and champion this new kind of artist complements Sullivan’s work of repositioning the artist as a researcher. Imagining a new social role for the artist, Sullivan maps studio practice onto a full range of research methodologies and groups them under interpretivist, structural, and critical research traditions. This allows the artist great scope for moving the motivations of the studio into the social realm. Sullivan traces his ideas from the hermeneutics of Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur, and finds that in *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts* (2009), “...the visual artist is not only adept at expression and communication but also plays a crucial role in cultural critique, historical inquiry and educational development” (p. 97).

AND NOW What remains is to bring this approach to my own project and to show how questions surrounding the current state of the book arts are particularly advantageous for launching such an inquiry. I also want to establish that the artist-researcher is an exciting new social role, as well as one that suits an increasingly academic artistic environment. It is this role, along with the kinds of work that it produces (tangible, virtual and critical) that need to be the basis of a new pedagogy, curriculum and future community of a re-imagined and expanded book arts.

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