

## **ARTISTS' BOOKS AND BEYOND: THE LIBRARY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AS A CURATORIAL AND RESEARCH RESOURCE\***

**By Janis Ekdahl**

This text will introduce you to the collection of inexpensive artists' books in the Library of The Museum of Modern Art. With over 9,000 artists' books the Library's collection is one of the largest and most comprehensive repositories open to the public. Some highlights from the collection will be presented and then cataloging and storing the books will be dealt with.

In November 1929 The Museum of Modern Art opened in New York City, pioneering the concept of a museum devoted to avant-garde art. As an institution committed to the art of its own time, MoMA (as it is affectionately called) participated, as no other institution had yet done, in the discovery, patronage, and interpretation of new talent. The Museum was selecting art to exhibit and to acquire that often had not yet acquired the imprimatur of "art." Alfred H. Barr, the Museum's founding director, had a unusually broad vision for his time: in 1929 he told the Trustees that "the Museum of Modern Art would probably expand beyond the narrow limits of painting and sculpture in order to include departments devoted to drawings, prints, photography,.. architecture, furniture.. and, a library of films." Within five years, all of those curatorial departments had been established as well as a public reference library.

From its inception the reference Library shared the Museum's inclusive and expansive definition of modern art. Bernard Karpel, the Museum Librarian from 1942 to 1973, sought out the publications of this century's avant-garde artists: manifestos by the Italian Futurists, broadsides issued by the Dadaists and Surrealists and artist-produced magazines such as *291*, *MERZ*, *BLAST*, and *MECANO*. As primary sources they provide historical and intellectual context for major 20<sup>th</sup> century artists whose work is in the Museum's permanent collection. Increasingly these once-ephemeral publications are in-demand to provide a cultural and intellectual framework for exhibited artwork.

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\* (Paper presented at the international conference, "Museums in Libraries - Libraries in Museums," May 17 - 20, 1999 in Moscow)

To emphasize the curatorial use that is regularly made of the Library's resources I have selected a few slides of recent exhibitions that have included library material, especially artists' books. While you are looking at these I will describe the Library. The Museum Library holds more than 160,000 books and exhibition catalogs, subscribes to approximately 300 periodicals, and maintains over 40,000 vertical files of ephemera on individual artists. In addition to the Artists' Books Collection, which I will tell you about shortly, the Library is especially rich in documentation of Dada and Surrealism.

With a staff of 15, the MoMA Library acquires and catalogs approximately 5,000 titles annually. Everything in the Library is cataloged in the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). Our catalog, christened DADATABASE, is available over the Internet on The Museum of Modern Art Web-site: <http://www.moma.org>. We were surprised to learn that DADATABASE had over 40,000 virtual visitors during March.

The Library is used heavily by the Museum staff and is open to the public, by appointment, 24 hours a week. Our users include students, critics, curators, auction house employees, artists, and members of the general public. By the end of this June we predict that the Library will have accommodated nearly 4,800 "real" visitors this year.

The scope of the Library's collection generally mirrors that of the Museum. Of course the Library is able to document a far wider range of art and artists than is possible, or desirable, for the Museum to represent. The Library assiduously collects material on emerging artists and contemporary art forms in anticipation of future research needs. We also pay special attention to publications that directly reflect the thoughts of artists: for example, artists' writings, statements, periodicals, and - as we are discussing today - artists' books.

When Clive Phillpot became the Chief Librarian in 1977 he established the Artist Book Collection to acquire and preserve the small, inexpensive books that artists had begun making and distributing in the 1960s. Phillpot built this special collection through purchases and through his contacts with artist book makers. In 1993 he negotiated the Library's acquisition of the Franklin Furnace Archive of Artists' Books thereby adding over 3,500 new titles to the Library's Artist Book Collection.

The Franklin Furnace was established in 1976 as an alternative space that collected and exhibited artists' books. In the early 1990s they decided to sell their loft space on Franklin Street and to divest themselves of the Archive of Artists' Books. It was fortuitous that the Archive could find another home in New York City. The

Franklin Furnace now functions as a virtual performance space on the Web (<http://www.franklinfurnace.org>).

As I mentioned earlier, the Artist Book Collection has over 9,000 titles which are, like the rest of the Library, fully cataloged. Phillipot left the Library in 1994 but the collection has continued to grow. Our principle supplier is the Printed Matter Bookstore in New York although we routinely receive donations from artists around the world.

There is no agreement among critics, curators and writers as to the definition of an "artists book." Much ink has been spilled in the struggle to find properly inclusive terminology for this convergence of art, language, and the printing technologies. In 1976 Conceptual artist, Sol LeWitt offered this description:

"Artists' books are, like any other medium, a means of conveying art ideas from the artist to the viewer/reader. Unlike most other media they are available to all at a low cost. They do not need a special place to be seen. They are not valuable except for the ideas they contain...

Art shows come and go but books stay around for years. They are works themselves, not reproductions of works. "

Many critics have noted the strong parallel between the artists' books of the 1960s and 1970s and those published in the early years of this century by the Russian Futurists. In both eras artists used the book format to disseminate unconventional, revolutionary ideas. The Futurists used readily available printing technologies to produce inexpensive books over which they had complete control. Like their counterparts in Europe and America fifty years later, the Russian Futurists made a decisive break from the traditional book and the deluxe print portfolio. In their hands the book became a forum for direct communication that could be easily and readily circulated. The Library's Artist Book Collection traces much of its legacy to the provocative, and low technology experiments of the Russian Futurists.

I want to take a moment here to clarify that the artists' books I am describing today are not the expensive *livres de luxe* that are collected by the Museum of Modern Art's curatorial Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. In 1994, 150 of that department's most beautiful and precious books and portfolios were featured in an exhibition and catalog entitled *A Century of Artists Books*. The curator's restricted definition of *livres d'artist* to describe only limited edition, luxury items continues to cause consternation in the artists' book community and confusion among the general public.

Therefore let me be explicit about the artists books in the Library's collection. They are inexpensive publications that came to prominence since 1960. They are modest books, often utilizing a photo-mechanical method of production. Usually these artists' books are bound into a codex volume and make use of that format to articulate a verbal or visual idea or experience. The artists' books we collect are

issued in open or large editions (for example, 100-or-more copies). Many are neither signed nor numbered. In principal, these artists' books have closer affinities to mass market paperbacks than to fine print portfolios.

Now I would like to show you 10 books from the Library's Artist Book Collection which embody many of these characteristics. They also exemplify the diversity of intention and style that is characteristic of the artists' book in the Library's collection.

Edward Ruscha's *Twentysix gasoline stations* from 1962 embodies many of the attributes that subsequently have come to characterize the artist book in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this small paperback book Ruscha records 26 gasoline stations in banal, black-and-white photographs. All the photographs were taken on Route 66 which, 40 years ago, was the principle highway connecting the sparsely populated towns of the southwestern United States. Each gas station is captioned simply with the name of the town and is presented in a straightforward documentary fashion. However, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is not boring or uninteresting. It has a subversive, deadpan humor characteristic of the Pop art being made in the 1960s.

*Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was initially published in an edition of 400. In 1967 it was reissued in an edition of 500 and, two years later, in an edition of 3,000. For many years Ruscha sought to keep this and his other books in-print and available, at a reasonable price. Unfortunately he did not succeed and copies of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* are now very scarce and expensive when offered for sale.

The idea of using the book as a medium coincided with the development of Conceptual art in the late 1960s. Conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Sol LeWitt, Peter Downsbrough, and Joseph Kosuth used the written work in art and as art. The first exhibition of Lawrence Weiner's linguistic work was organized with the Seth Siegelau Gallery in 1968. The exhibition consisted of 24 phrases, presented as the contents of this gray paperback, *Statements*. Weiner's statements conjure up specific sculptural, performative processes such as: "One piece of plywood secured to the floor or wall" and "An amount of paint poured directly upon the floor and allowed to dry". The statements themselves are printed, one to a page, in elegantly abstract blocks. The small, offset paperback was issued in 1000 copies and cost only \$1.95. Although it is a tangible aspect of specific works, Weiner does not consider the book a work of art itself. Rather he considers the book as the medium through which he presents his art. As Weiner has cryptically written, the viewer must "Learn to read art."

Sol LeWitt is another Conceptual artist who uses the book to systemically interrogate his own aesthetics. In *Four basic kinds of lines & colors*, 1971, LeWitt sets out a visual premise then systematically explores the development of the

premise page by page. As you may be able to see from the index pages of this perfectly square 20 cm. book, the artist has identified four types of lines: vertical, horizontal, diagonal to the right, and diagonal to the left. He also has picked four colors: yellow, black, red and blue. Then he combines each of these elements according to a pre-determined formula to produce 30 combinations with differing colors and densities. The fixed sequence of pages in a codex book is ideal for the exploration of these serial progressions. LeWitt's systems are hermetic and closed yet they contain a logical elegance and rigorous beauty.

In this 1976 book *Brutus killed Caesar*, John Baldesarri takes advantage of the photographic sequencing to transmit a haunting narrative. Each page of this horizontal-format book consists of three panels. The images on the left and right - a slender man with the receding hairline and an older, paunchy man - are repeated on every page. Only the object depicted in the center panel changes as the pages are flipped over. Innocuous objects such as a brush, a watch or a funnel, become threatening when placed in sequence with lethal objects such as a gun, an arrow, and matches. It is only when we recall the book's title, *Brutus killed Caesar*, that we realize each of these objects could be an instrument of death. This unexpectedly menacing book reflects Baldesarri's consciousness of language and his sophisticated use of the visual pun.

Other artists use the book as an album in which to assemble or inventory images or ideas. In the early 1970s Annette Messenger published a number of small booklets that she called "album-collections." In her 1974 *Les Tortures volontaires* the artist reproduced photographic images of women voluntarily submitting to various torturous treatments and rituals associated with the attainment of beauty. These grainy images of facial peels and plastic surgeries were gathered from mass-market newspapers and magazines. Because the book seems to reproach the painful sacrifices that women undergo to make themselves attractive to men it has earned a place in feminist discussion. However, Messenger claims that she assembled these images simply for the purpose of examining the relationship of art to ordinary aspects of daily life.

Christian Boltanski also works in the tradition of albums and collections. In *Le Club Mickey* Boltanski selects children's snapshots clipped from a yellowing issue of the *Mickey (Mouse) Club* newsletter of 1950. Each of these eager, smiling children is captioned with his or her own six-digit Mickey Mouse Club membership number, proof that they are part of a group, that they belong. Published in 1990 the book comments ironically on the pervasive, unquestioned influence that Walt Disney and American television had on the French-speaking world, from Antibes to Saigon, in the 1950s. By evoking the lost innocence of childhood *Le Club Mickey* explores the passage of time and the role that memory plays in that passage.

A more personal, poignant feeling is evoked by Francine Zubié's 1993 book *Panique générale*. In this deceptively simple book the same black-and-white photograph of an elegant but anxious young bride appears on every page. Bound between bright red endpapers the images are repeated on milky white translucent pages. The bride's face is hidden in shadow behind her white veil. The reader keeps turning the pages in a futile attempt to glimpse the expression on this young woman's face. By shifting the image slightly on each page, the book has a luminous three-dimensionality; the image of the bride seems to exist in space. A single line of text, printed in fine red letters on every other page, gives voice to the young woman's private thoughts: "a feeling of suffocation" [ une sensation d'étouffement ] and "this disarray of the soul" [ ce déssarroi de l'âme ]. These musings work with the image to intensify the reader's feeling of panic and entrapment.

Another significant category of artists' books are those that transform or alter the codex in some way. Perhaps the best known example of this is Tom Phillips' *Humument: A treated Victorian Novel*. For this work Phillips alters an existing book: *The Human Document*, an obscure 1892 novel by W. H. Mallock. Each page of this rambling novel has been radically edited by Phillips to produce an entirely new verbal and visual work. Through erasures and embellishments most of the Victorian text is obscured. The letters, words and phrases that remain convey an entirely new lyrical narrative. Phillips has related that, at first

"I merely scored out unwanted words with pen and ink. It was not long though before the possibility became apparent of making a better unity of word and image, intertwined as in a mediaeval miniature."

*A Humument* may have the distinction of being the most commercially successful artists' book ever. The first version of *A Humument* was published by Thames and Hudson in 1980 and found wide, popular acceptance. Phillips has continued to work with Mallock's text, altering at least 12 copies of *The Human Document*. Thames and Hudson published one of those alterations 1987 and another in 1997. Dieter Roth, a Swiss artist who died last year, was, like Ed Ruscha, one of the seminal figures in the history of the artist book. Joanna Drucker summarizes his impact:

"Roth is the first artist to make books the major focus for his work and to engage with the book as an art work - not a publication or vehicle for literary or visual expression, but as a form in itself."

Roth made the first *Daily Mirror Book* in 1961. It was a tiny 2 x 2 cm cube that was made by cutting squares out of a pile of the London tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mirror* and giving them a glued spine. In 1970 Roth reconceived the *Daily Mirror* in a standard octavo format which he published in edition of 1,000. This version, on the screen now, was published in collaboration with Hansjörg Mayer as Volume 10 of Roth's *Collected Work*. Each page in this version reproduces a blown-up

image of a small snippet from the *Daily Mirror*, which itself is reproduced in the lower corners. Roth established the sequence for these images by inscribing a number on each tiny piece of newsprint. In this book, as in all of his work, Roth's art is inseparable from its form as a book.

Finally I would like to show you a collaborative work from 1991. *In the Crack of the Dawn* brings together two generations of Conceptual artists: Matt Mullican, born in 1951, and Lawrence Weiner, born in 1940. You will recall that a few minutes ago we looked at Lawrence Weiner's *Statements*, a ground-breaking book from 1968. This comic book, however, has a much lighter tone. The graphic simplifications of Mullican's fictional landscapes are interspersed with Weiner's terse notations and solid color geometric forms. Both artists explore our relationship to the urban environment and challenge the cultural assumptions about contemporary space. The gravity of these concerns are less ponderous because of the lively colors, the responsive interplay of forms and the presentation as a comic book. There is a lively dialogue between each artist's characteristic visual and verbal style.

The Library pursues several strategies to make the Artist Book Collection accessible to as wide a public as possible. Foremost among those strategies is thorough cataloging. At MoMA the basic bibliographic record is amplified, when appropriate, with descriptions of physical characteristics and subject matter. In addition, the term "artists' books" is part of the cataloging record for all books that share this form. Other terms that we frequently include in the MARC 655 field are listed on my handout. All of these terms can be used as keywords or phrase searches in DADABASE. Also some records include a *citation or reference* notation, indicating where a particular book was reviewed or discussed.

Also awareness of the collection is enhanced through exhibitions. The Library routinely lends artists' books to exhibitions in the Museum and elsewhere. Currently 21 books from the collection are touring the United States in the exhibition, *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists Books*, curated by Clive Phillpot and Cornelia Lauf. The Library also has a small display area where artists' books are regularly featured.

College and art school students are frequently introduced to the collection through class visits. During these classes the students are able to handle and discuss the artists' books with their instructor.

The Artist Book Collection is housed in a restricted stack area to which only library staff has access. We routinely use two types of enclosures to house the artists' books. They are designed to protect the books from dust and light and to prevent the books from being battered on the shelf. The most common enclosure consists of

an acid-free envelope, with flap, glued into a heavy, acid-free cardboard binder. Even though the books themselves vary in size and thickness, the binders are uniform, thereby facilitating shelving and diminishing the possibility of a tiny book being lost between two bigger volumes. For books thicker than approximately 15mm we construct a protective enclosure, commonly called a "phase box." These enclosures are fashioned from sturdy acid-free boards and are secured with buttons or velcro. Oddly shaped and large, flat items are stored in acid-free boxes or in flat metal map cabinets.

Today I have been able to give you only a brief introduction to artists' books and a hint of the wonderful diversity of style and form that is included in the Library's Artist Book Collection. Of course, looking at covers and single pages does not convey the experience of holding an artists' book in your hands and discovering the artist's intention by turning the pages. Each artist book has something to reveal to the right reader. It is our challenge and mission to facilitate those connections so that these treasures are revealed.

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