

Artists' books at the Brooklyn Museum of Art

by Deirdre E. Lawrence

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"If Marshall McLuhan were a gypsy and his teacup the art world, the tea leaves would be artists' books".

Ingrid Sishey (1)

This quote resonates so well since it points to the role artists books have had both as messengers of information and works of art in themselves. From mass produced, or open editions to limited editions to unique bookworks – artists' books underscore McLuhan's ideas about the medium as the message. Artists' books constitute an innovative art form that museums and libraries have had to grapple with as a collecting focus. What complicates the development of a collection policy for artists' books is that they defy definition, categories or boundaries. Very often collection development decisions in museums and libraries evolve over a number of years in order to acknowledge the role of any one art form within a larger scheme. This is true for the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA) Library as outlined in this brief history.

The early years

Collecting artists books at the BMA began as a rather low-key activity of artists simply sending their books to the curators. The curators would receive these very interesting looking books and after examining them would not really know what to do with them – the answer "Book? Send it to the Library". Upon arrival in the Library, these gems would either be cataloged into the main stacks or if fewer than 50 pages were relegated to the artists files, an extensive series of files on artists comprised of small publications, clippings, reviews etc. I suspect this has happened in several museum libraries over the years. Since I've been at the BMA as principal librarian (late 1983), it has been a continual delight to come upon artists' books that had been in hiding in the stacks or artists' files waiting to be discovered. This process continues with the most recent discovery of Michael Snow's *Cover to Cover* (1975) in the stacks and Jim Dine's *Nancy and I in Ithaca* (1967) sitting in the artists' files. They have now joined the rest of the artists' book collection stored together as part of the Library's Special Collections.

Recognizing that artists books have grown out of a continued experimental relationship between word and image one can examine this tradition by looking at the BMA's early acquisitions of books made or designed by artists. Key examples of the book form as art are held in the Library such as the work of William Blake, Elihu Vedder, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, Salvador Dali and Marcel Duchamp. In 1926, the BMA played a role in creating a very innovative exhibition catalog that could be considered a precursor of the artists' book. The avant garde publication, entitled *Modern Art*, was designed by the artists Katherine Dreier and Constantin Alajalov, and influenced by El Lissitzky and Marcel Duchamp. Alajalov, a student of El Lissitzky, based his design on an earlier publication that Lissitzky had worked on with Vladimir Mayakovsky entitled *Dlia*

Golosa/The Voice published in 1923. Alajalov and Dreier's publication entitled *Modern Art*, which was the catalog for the "International Exhibition of Modern Art", exemplified Lissitsky's early innovations with the integration of typeface and imagery imposed on pages presented in a tabular format. (**ILLUSTRATION 1**) The BMA Library holds many more examples of books and exhibition catalogs that were precursors for what we know today as artists' books.

A conscious decision to collect artists' books by the BMA Library began in 1970 with the acquisition of Dan Graham's *End Notes* published in 1969. Other early acquisitions included *Business cards* by Billy Al Bengston and Ed Ruscha (1968). These books were acquired either directly from the artists themselves or bookstores such as Printed Matter and even more mainstream shops such as George Wittenborn where Ed Ruscha's *Various small fires and milk* (1964) *Thirty four parking lots in Los Angeles* (1967) and *Crackers* (1969) were purchased in 1973 for the sums of \$3.70, \$3.25 and \$4.70 respectively. These numbers seem low now that these books, and other more contemporary artists' books, command much higher prices on the current market. But those highly affordable prices in fact ensured artists' books, especially multiples, would reach a much wider audience of artists, librarians, collectors and others who were drawn to these compelling visual documents. In addition to Ruscha, the Library actively collected the work of Sol Lewitt, Lawrence Weiner and the *Assembling* series compiled by Richard Kostelanetz and books created by artists working in the previous decade (see end of this essay). An important enhancement of the collection came with the donation of several limited edition artists' books in 1979. Titles donated include Dieter Roth's Hansjorg Mayer publications *Bucher und Grafik* (1972), *Stupidogramme* (1975) and *Trophies* (1979), Emmett Williams' *Selected Shorter Poems* (1978), Mark Boyle's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and Ronald King's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (all published in 1978).

The collection continued to expand in the nineteen eighties through generous grants awarded to the Printed Matter Bookstore in Manhattan. Sol and Carol LeWitt and the J. M. Kaplan Fund both awarded matching grants to libraries in New York City to assist with acquiring artists books. Through these grants multiples acquired through Printer Matter were added to the collection such as Robert Smithson's *Torn photograph from the second stop* (1985). Through purchases from other vendors and direct from the artists the collection grew with other works such as Susan King's *Women and Cars* (1983) (**ILLUSTRATION 2**), Warren Lehrer and Dennis Bernstein's *French Fries* (1984), *Mim* by Telfer Stokes and Helen Douglas (1986) and *Visual Poetry* by Helmut Lohr (1987) and Kevin Osborn's *Tropos* (1988).

Funding for artists' books had to compete with budgets supporting the acquisition of other books for the Library collection. This changed in 1993 with the Mary Dorward fund. Ms. Dorward was a former librarian at the BMA (1934-1958) who left over a million dollars in endowment funds to the BMA for the acquisition of art. With the approval of the Museum Director, \$2,000 is allocated on an annual basis to the Library for the acquisition of artists' books from this fund allowing us to acquire new as well as older titles such as the periodical entitled *Aqui!* published in Brooklyn in the mid-1980's.

Partially through the Dorward Fund and private donation we were able to acquire the Susan Share collection in 1997 and 1998. Susan, an artist, performer and teacher, has work included in several public and private collections including the Victoria & Albert Museum and private collections such as the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry (Miami Beach, Florida). Susan is also a book conservator who was on the BMA staff from 1990 to 1998.

Susan Share's collection contains 106 artists' books, mostly multiples and several unique books, from seven exhibitions Susan had curated in Brooklyn in the 1980's. Her exhibitions included the "Naked Book" exhibition (Brooklyn, 1980), first "Book Gathering" (Brooklyn, 1981) and "The Visual Books", a traveling exhibit 1985-87. These exhibitions featured books by artists David Cole, Dick Higgins, Marilyn Rosenberg, Paul Zelevansky and many more American artists. Her exhibitions also included the work of international artists from Argentina, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands and Spain. (*ILLUSTRATION 3*) The collection includes archival materials relating to her curatorial efforts as well as exhibition catalogs and three scrapbooks of original artwork by artists from grant funded artists' programs of which Susan was involved. Rare periodicals can also be found in the collection such as issues of *Folding Cigar* (1980) and *Rubber* (1979-1980). Her collection brought to the BMA a particularly cohesive historical record of artist book activities representing a wide array of artists. The accompanying exhibition documentation is very interesting since it includes the work of artists who have played a major role in the development of artists' books.

Another acquisition that enriched the collection was the donation in 1999 of eight limited edition books published by Vincent FitzGerald. These books, all based on Persian poetry, relate to the Museum's long-standing interest in collecting and exhibiting the art of Persia. Not only are these books works of art unto themselves but they are also extraordinary vehicles for interpreting the poetry of Jalaluddin Mohammad Rumi. In fact one of the donated books, *Divan E Shams* (1996), was included in a recent Grolier Club exhibition in New York celebrating 100 of the finest printed books published from 1900-1999. FitzGerald's books are the product of an intense collaboration between the publisher/printer, the selected artist, typographer and binder. (*ILLUSTRATION 4*) These books fit well into the BMA collection that includes many works that are products of the marriage of art and literature. Other recent acquisitions of artists books inspired by literature are *Homely Girl, a Life* by Louise Bourgeois (1992) based on Arthur Miller's short story, Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* by Michael Magriel and Peter Kruty (1998) and *Double Game* by Sophie Calle and writer Paul Auster (1999).

A Collection Development Policy has evolved

Being in New York City, it would be silly to collect artists' books in a vacuum especially with the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Public Library actively collecting artists' books. We very often check on-line resources or talk to our colleagues to determine if one of these institutions has already purchased a specific title especially if that title is expensive. We have developed a collection policy that does not define what an

artists' book actually is but instead allows for the acquisition of all types of books which could be defined as an artists' book. This policy recognizes that artists' books constitute a highly varied contemporary art form and it has been a goal to collect artists' books that integrate text, images and binding that reflect an artist's unique vision. This would include books produced in both traditional or experimental formats utilizing a wide-range of materials.

Today, the BMA Library collection has a full range of artists' books from multiples to limited editions to unique works. The collecting focus is broken into four categories.

Works created by:

- 1) Brooklyn-based artists such as Meg Belichick and Peter Kruty
- 2) artists who are exhibited by the Museum or who have work in the Museum's object collection such as Barbara Kruger and Leandro Katz
- 3) artists who create work that relates to the objects or cultures that are represented in the Museum's object collections such as Sabra Moore's *Reconstructed Project* (1984) based on a Mayan codex and Donald Baechler's *A life without pocket change: an Egyptian expense diary ten days up and down the Nile* (1990)

(ILLUSTRATION 5)

- 4) artists who are considered to be innovators or masters in the artists books world such as Johanna Drucker and Sjoerd Hofstra.

Within this plan there is a primary focus on multiples, with less of an emphasis on limited edition and unique works. The Chief Curator and/or the Curator of Prints and Drawings are consulted when we are considering expensive titles or work that may possibly fall within the realm of another curatorial department.

An artists book exhibition

In talking with book artists and dealers over the years a frequently asked question was "when are you going to organize an exhibition of artists books?" Yes, we frequently exhibit artists' books in the Library's display cases, and hold special events for the public to view portions of the collection and lend artists' books to other institutions for exhibition purposes. And of course the public can make an appointment to see specific works but that is certainly not the same as pulling a group of books together and developing a theme so that the public can view and consider what these books are meant to communicate. However given the fact that we have over 2,000 artists' books in the collection where does one focus within the wide spectrum of this collection? Given the fact that there are so many artists based in Brooklyn producing innovative books the Museum decided to mount an exhibition as part of its "Working in Brooklyn" series. From February to May 2000, the BMA held an exhibition entitled "Artists Books" with over 50 works created by Brooklyn-based artists working in the 1990's. The exhibition was very well received by the public who either already knew of the world of artists books or who were surprised that they exist. Several themes were represented in the exhibition such as the interaction between art and literature, environmentalism, socio-political and gender issues. Examples of multiples, limited editions and unique works were included and are illustrated here. (**ILLUSTRATIONS 6, 7, 8**). The exhibition was

unusual for a few reasons: it was one of a few museum exhibitions to showcase multiples, limited edition and unique works together, and a group of multiples were on display on a library reading table so that the public could hold and view each work without having to view the books through a display case or a vitrine. The reading table was situated in the center of the gallery therefore placing the multiples in the center of the artists book universe with limited edition and unique work placed on the walls and in cases surrounding the table. (*ILLUSTRATION 9*). All the signage was done in letterpress by Woodside Press, based in Brooklyn, to encourage the visitor to think about how typography plays an important role in artists' books. The *Artists Books* exhibition catalog, designed by Brooklyn-based artist Stacey Wakefield of Evil Twin Publications, is an artists' book itself. The publication, loosely based on the design of the 1926 *Modern Art* catalog previously mentioned in this essay, illustrated each work along with a statement from each artist about his or her book. The catalog was hung on a chain on four of the gallery walls so that the public could easily refer to the artists' statements to fully understand the works on view. A second publication, a limited edition book, was created as part of collaboration with Pratt Institute's Art of the Book Program. Entitled *B*, an edition of 300 copies, it is a sampling of ideas by nine artists at Pratt Institute depicting the ethnic, cultural, historical and natural diversities of Brooklyn. Proceeds from the sale of *B* support the book arts programs at the BMA and at Pratt Institute.

Through purchase and donation the collection today includes a rich and varied selection of styles and methods of fabrication from finely crafted bookworks to photocopy and offset open editions. While the codex format predominates other forms are included – sprout books (Douglas Beube's *Extinct Species*, 1985), scrolls (*InoN* by Mark Katzman and Susan Kress, 1990), sculptural bookworks (Robbin Ami Silverberg's *From Dreams to Ashes*, 1995-99), (*ILLUSTRATION 10*) posters (Jan Henderikse's *Bravo*, 1995) and even messages in plastic cassettes that are hand cranked (Stephen Kaplan's *Crank* series, 1992).

There are now over 2,500 titles in the BMA Library's artists book collection with additional substantial holdings of books and exhibition catalogs about artists' books. Aside from privately published work, the collection holds a selection of books produced by a variety of publishers including Artichoke Yink Press, Peter Blum, Book Works, Bone Hollow Arts, Ediciones Vigia (Cuba), Granary Books, Horse in a Storm Press, Lapp Princess Press, Nexus Press, Poote Press, Pratt Adlib Press, Purgatory Pie Press, Visual Studies Workshop, Women's Studio Workshop. In addition to artists' books, other items made by artists in all shapes, sizes and forms can be found in the collection including periodicals, zines, stamps and mail art. Bibliographic records for the entire artists' book collection are available in the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN with NYBA as a library identifier). Within the next year we hope to have the BMA Library collection available on an on-line catalog available to the world on the Museum's website.

In the meantime, I thought it might be useful to list some representative titles by publication date to indicate the depth and range of the collection starting with 1960. So here goes! The following titles are published in editions – open or limited – unless otherwise noted:

- 1960 Richard Hamilton *Bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even; a typographic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box* (G. Wittenborn)
- 1961 Leandro Katz *Urnas, metal* (MBLK Editions)
- 1962 Ed Ruscha *Twentysix gasoline stations* (1962)
- 1963 Heinz Veuhoff *The Haunted Place* (H. Schiskowsky)
- 1964 Ray Johnson *The Paper Snake* (Something Else Press)
- 1965 Eugene Ionesco *The bald soprano: anti-play followed by an unpublished...* (Grove)
- 1966 Ed Ruscha *Every building on the Sunset Strip* (Self-published)
- 1967 Andy Warhol's *Index Book* (Random House)
- 1968 Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler ... (Siegelau/Wendler)
- 1969 Sol Lewitt *Four basic kinds of straight lines ...* (Studio International)
- 1970 Richard Kostelanetz *Assembling: a collection of otherwise ...* (Gnilbmessa)
- 1971 Hamish Fulton *Hollow lane* (Situation Publications)
- 1972 Joe Brainard *The Cigarette Book* (Siamese Banana Press)
- 1973 Gilbert and George *A guide to Singing sculpture* (All for All)
- 1974 Richard Long *Inca rock campfire ash* (Robert Self)
- 1975 Don Celender *Museum Piece* (O.K.Harris)
- 1976 John Baldessari *Brutus killed Caesar* (Univ. of Akron)
- 1977 Dieter Roth *96 piccadillies* (Eaton House)
- 1978 Martha Rosler *Service: a trilogy on colonization* (Printed Matter)
- 1979 John Eric Broadus *Red square : blue square*. Unique book
- 1980 Kurt Johannessen *Movements* (Self-published)
- 1981 Ida Applebroog *I can't: a performance* (Self-published)
- 1982 Vito Acconci ... *Illegal America* (Exit Art)
- 1983 Raymond Queneau *One hundred million million poems* (Kickshaws)
- 1984 Louise Odes Neaderland *The nuclear fan* (Bone Hollow Arts)
- 1985 Stephanie Brody Lederman *Notes from the couch. 2nd year* (Self-published)
- 1986 Davi Det Hompson in *Aqui!* (Aqui! Magazine, number 9)
- 1987 Tom Phillips *A humument: a treated Victorian novel* (Thames and Hudson)
- 1988 Janet Zweig and Holly Anderson *Sheherezade: a flip book* (Carl Sesto)
- 1989 Sharon Gilbert *Green, the fragile* (Self-published)
- 1990 Johanna Drucker *History of the me/my word: fragments ...* (Self-published)
- 1991 Timothy Ely *Doppler Gossip* (Unique)
- 1992 David Stairs *Casein* (Self-published)
- 1993 Miranda Maher *Girls! Girls! Girls!:madwomen & murderesses* (Horse in a Storm)
- 1994 Renee Green *Camino Road* (Free Agent Media)
- 1995 R. T. Simon *Wings* (Bread and Puppet Press)
- 1996 Meg Belichick *Miss Gowanus* (Self-published)
- 1997 Ruth Lingen and Lois Lane *I know where I'm going* (Poote Press)
- 1998 Mark Wagner *Smoke in my dreams: a book* (Bird Brain Press)
- 1999 Roni Gross *Little black book* (Zitouna Press)
- 2000 Sjoerd Hofstra *ARC* (ZET)

2001 Anne Gilman *Bordes Deshilachados/Frayed Edges* (Ediciones Vigia)

References:

1. Feature article by Ingrid Sishey in the National Arts Guide, vol. 1, no.1, Jan-Feb. 1979, p.2-3
2. The author gratefully acknowledges the generous amount of time that the Printed Matter staff and several other artist book dealers have spent with me reviewing possible acquisitions. The collection has grown through donations from the artists themselves and through the generosity of collectors who have supported our efforts to build a well-rounded collection of artists' books. Finally, many thanks to the BMA Library staff for making these collections accessible.

CAPTIONS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

1. ***Modern Art*** Text by Katherine S. Dreier (Societe Anonyme, 1926)
2. ***Women and cars*** compiled by Susan E. King (Rosendale, N.Y.: Women's Studio Workshop : Paradise Press, 1983)
3. ***Capsa 4*** by J. M. Calleja, Jordi Cuyas, Jaume Simon (Mataro, Spain: Calleja, 1981)
4. ***Gazelle in the Donkey Stable*** by Aleksandar Duravcevic (New York: Vincent FitzGerald & Co., 1999) No.2 of 50. Printing: Daniel Keleher, Handmade Papers: Paul Wong, Binding and translation: Zahra Partovi.
5. ***A life without pocket change: an Egyptian expense diary: ten days up and down the Nile*** by Donald Baechler (New York: Ajax Press, 1990)
6. ***He's Got a Gun!*** by David Thorne (New York: Hot water, 1999)
7. ***Crazy Quilt*** by Maureen Cummins (New York: Inanna Press, 1998) No. 5 of 100. Silkscreen and letterpress on folio paper.
8. ***Ancient Armor*** by Miriam Schaer (Unique work, 1996) Girdle, acrylic, photocopy.
9. ***Artists Books*** installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2000
10. ***From Dreams to Ashes*** by Robbin Ami Silverberg (Brooklyn, N. Y.: Dobbin Books, 1995-1999) Edition of 4. Mugwort and abaca papers, photo watermarks, matches, photos bound in two volumes.