**Artists, books, zines - art publications** July-August, 1998

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In the summer of 1972, at the Visual Studies Workshop (VSW), I thought the surprising idea of an artist's book was the best thing I had ever heard of. The combination of words, images and a three-dimensional object; the potential for narrative in a time-based medium; the notion of "the democratic multiple" that could bypass the gallery system and communicate directly with a diverse audience - all of these things, through a form that I had always loved, were appealing. There were, finally, a few problems with this construction. When those problems became limitations, book artists responded in different ways; some of us moved on to other forms. But, 25 years after that summer at VSW, I am teaching a class at the Rhode Island School of Design called "Zines: Start your own Publication," and some of my students think the surprising idea of a zine is the best thing they've ever heard of. I think this time they're right.

While book artists were either abandoning or fetishizing the form in the '80s, there was a burgeoning underground zine movement that fulfilled many of the promises made for the artist's book a decade before. By now, the zine movement has its own chronicled histories, and lists of its precursors always include Dada, sci-fi fanzines, the underground political press and small literary presses. I haven't found a single reference to artists' books in those histories. Though the stated ambitions and intentions are related, there seems to be no overlap between the two realms. Zines have succeeded with those ambitions connected to audience and communication where most artists' books have failed.

Some of the reasons that these two forms have rarely crossed paths seem clear. Artists' books, like performance art, came out of the visual arts, while zines, like samizdat, were driven by the pure necessity of creating alternative forms and avenues for communication and information exchange. The visuals were occasionally important in zines but they were rarely the motivating factor. The production values of early zines were always low - the first people to make zines produced them on a shoestring, cutting and pasting in their spare time, using copy machines at their jobs. Zines, unlike artists' books, have never tried to be a profitable commodity and this is, in part, what has kept them vital. They are usually traded or sold at cost through a vast underground network of other zine makers and zine readers. Zines review and advertise each other. Now there are zine distributors, zine stores and zine websites, but most zines still just meet production costs at best. A broad variety of isolated efforts have formed an emergent movement that continues to grow; estimates range toward 50,000 different zines with a couple million readers. A disregard of market factors provides the possibility for personal or radical content intended for a very limited audience. While some zines were created in response to group interest or spring from collaborative efforts, most zines come from a single eccentric voice. These zines find their audience after the fact, unconcerned with size or economic status - they don't conform to their audiences' desires. This makes the zine a truly unique form within the larger arena of publication arts.

Conversely, many book artists were eventually pushed by economic necessity to satisfy the desires of a particular audience. Influenced by Fluxus and Dada, they initially aspired to make ephemeral, experimental and performative work in large, inexpensive editions that could reach a diverse audience. Unfortunately, offset printing could supply large quantities, but never inexpensively. Once we left our schools or jobs, where we had access to presses, printing costs were prohibitive. In addition, there was no practical avenue for distribution, so the support of a large audience was a pipe dream. This problem led many artists to move toward fine press books and/or livres d'artistes. The categories were never distinct, and decorative book craft is often what people call artists' books these days. Collectors who valued beautiful letterpress printing and fine binding paid more for these qualities, so satisfying this market for the lavish "book object" became a way for many book artists to continue to produce their work.

The artists who held onto their vision of the ephemeral "democratic multiple" had few places to sell their books and took a loss with each edition. One of the only book distributors for this kind of work is Printed Matter in New York, and though they've bravely kept at it over all these years, they've never reached a broad enough audience (many loyal fine art and university librarians do, however, keep buying artists' books), nor seen enough financial return to keep the artists going. There has been no real place for the artist's book within the larger fine art or literary critical discourse, probably because of the blurriness of the category, the conflation of book crafts and artists' books. Many factors conspired to keep artists' books in a small dark corner of the art world.

But everytime we think artists' books are dead, someone - this time it's me - announces that they are reviving again. Over the past few years, I have seen some interesting activity in the discussion and production of artists' books. The critical conversation has become revitalized in some recent publications, and there are several new artists' books that are interesting in both form and content. Perhaps, too, we can look at artists' books in a new light now that this fresh wave of zine makers has shown us another approach to self publishing.

In 1994, acting on a genuine zine impulse - that irrepressible urge to communicate because you have something to say - artist Brad Freeman started his homemade Journal of Artists' Books, or more appropriately, JAB, and has published it twice a year since then. JAB's first logo was a scruffily drawn image of a little person of indeterminate gender punching some big lug in the jaw, accompanied by the words "guaranteed to change your consciousness." A combination of serious critical articles and a pastiche of imagery and text, JAB is a lively and iconoclastic forum for ideas about artists' books, with accompanying controversies, arguments and debates in print. The earlier issues were peppered with Freeman's and art historian and artist Johanna Drucker's eccentric wit in the form of various asides and images. JAB got angry letters and enthusiastic praise. Factions formed and debate was sparked. People looked forward to getting their copies and actually argued over the content (I was once grabbed at a party by someone who wanted to complain about an article he'd read in JAB.) Occasionally it went too far; JAB jabbed a few people in the jaw but got away with it through its sheer good-natured energy. I wrote two articles for JAB, since my interest in artists' books had been piqued. The first was an extended rant about the trend toward craft objects, but by the time I got around to writing a second article, I turned toward a discussion of work that I found interesting. In fact, the general tenor of JAB has changed in this way - once artists and writers had aired their complaints, they turned toward a more serious discussion of work. The design of JAB has become more sedate recently, and even the logo has changed - now it's a little person of indeterminate gender just riding a bicycle, as if to say, "We got that out of our system, now we're moving it forward."

In 1995, Granary Books published Drucker's The Century of Artists' Books, a serious attempt to establish a critical language for understanding the book as a specific artistic form, with a clear discussion of the typologies within the field (Ed. note: See review in Afterimage 25, no. 1 [July/August 1997]). This put artists' books on the art map for the first time since the '70s when critics Lucy Lippard and Clive Philport, among others, had written about them.

In recent years, I've seen some new artists' books that have all of the urgency of zines and all of the visual sophistication of any contemporary art being done today. These books, like photographer Bill Burke's Mine Fields (1995), Freeman's MuzeLink (1997), and artist Alfredo Jaar's a hundred times nguyen (1994), are filled with radical content and formed in a radical manner.

Mine Fields is Burke's third book published by Nexus Press in Atlanta. Like his previous book, I Want to Take Picture (1987), Mine Fields is beautifully printed and filled with Burke's signature devices of collaged photographic portraits, mementos, journal facsimiles and lengthy anecdotal texts, all overlapping into several stories that converge around the author's internal struggles. The two parallel themes in Mine Fields are Burke's experiences photographing in war-torn Cambodia and the dissolution of his marriage and subsequent divorce back in Boston where he lives. Burke never pretends to be an objective photojournalist; he makes it clear that immersing himself in the horror of the Khmer Rouge is his way of escaping the horror of his domestic life. While the comparison can make the reader cringe, one does feel that Burke is well aware that there is really no comparison between these two situations, and that he uses his own life to give the book a subjective center that adds humility, doubt and even absurdity to the whole dubious enterprise. This makes the book both funny and very sad. He fills the book with information, pictures and facts about Cambodia and his experiences there, while giving us only an outsider's glimpse of the situation and not expecting us to make sense of it.

Freeman's MuzeLink is also a complex photographic book with a number of interweaving and overlapping riffs. It is less a documentary narrative than Burke's book, and more poetically structured, with themes that double back and resonate as they develop. A meta-book is embedded within it - the story of the author's printing history weaves through the concrete history of the book's own printing (Freeman did all the production and presswork). The book dummy is reproduced "beneath" or on many of the pages, rising up like the memory of the book's conception, while stories from the life of the author and his influences appear as a different form of memory theater, where objects and images represent ideas about fortune, power and coincidence. The images and anecdotes range from printing presses to military hardware; from anonymous car crashes to the author's own body, to bodies that are more disabled than his own; from a car theft to a Ku Klux Klan rally. The theme of luck presses against the themes of race, class and privilege. The author is ever implicating himself, never placing himself outside of the events no matter how near or far they are from his own experiences. After spending a long time with this complicated book, one sees how it all fits together as the themes inform and play off of each other. MuzeLink is partly about the strange and often coincidental linkages and contingencies within a life, and the internal structure of the book plays this out for the reader. The book echoes, deepens and forms new connections in the mind the longer one looks at it.

In contrast, Jaar's book, a hundred times nguyen, is extremely minimal, though also deeply affecting. On first glance, the book seems to be the same photograph of a young girl repeated on the right side of every page spread. One quickly notices slight differences in the girl's expression and tilt of her head. She looks slightly up at you or away as you turn the pages, and you feel her presence in these slight shifts. In actuality, there are four pictures, and Jaar has put them into every possible sequencial permutation, arriving at 96 pages of 24 sequences. He comes full circle at the end, repeating the first sequence to total one hundred pictures. These picture permutations have an interesting effect on the viewer; the ever-changing expression of the child's face enters more deeply into the viewer's consciousness as you see her expression go through these many varied transitions. In fact, this is the author's intention. In an afterward, Jaar writes that he met Nguyen Thi Thuy on a trip to Hong Kong in 1991 "to investigate the living conditions of Vietnamese asylum seekers incarcerated there and being threatened with repatriation." The child attached herself to him that day, and stayed in his mind after he left the place. Jaar has remained in contact with Nguyen since meeting her then. The book is a metonymic homage to one person, and it resonates by presenting so small and intense a part of a large and complicated picture.

These three artists give us a glimpse of themselves through their subjects and of their subjects through the authors' eyes. They achieve this by holding us in their worlds for a long time until a greater depth of empathy and understanding can be reached, something that can be accomplished within the extended narrative form of the book.

But, how can we look at new artists' books in the light of the zine phenomenon? Zines have broadened the scope of publication arts and have made the entire enterprise more lively and current. They have blurred the boundaries within the field in a completely different and more exciting direction than book crafts, and they've created a venue for all kinds of eccentric expression. Book artists could enter this realm and contribute a sophisticated visuality to it, while learning from its vitality and immediacy. Comic book artists have succeeded in getting their work into the distribution network of zines; some book artists might try this strategy too.

It becomes clear, though, that more factors separate artists' books from zines than link them. Ultimately, what the three books discussed above have in common with zines, aside from their obvious status as publications, are their freshness and their strong individual voices. They are certainly closer to zines in spirit than elaborate finepress, one-of-a-kind or sculptural books. But zines are part of a growing social conversation where audience informs content and vice versa. Zines invite feedback and reader response. Their success and popularity have given everyone permission to "do it yourself." In addition, production costs can only be this low when the work doesn't strive to be an art-market commodity. This means that it can be more accessible to a greater number of people. In other words, zines are the mythical "democratic multiple."

I recently went to the zine store See Hear in the East Village and bought about 15 zines for a total cost of $52.00. Among the zines I selected were the 147th issue of Duplex Planet, a riveting zine by David Greenberger devoted solely to interviews with residents of nursing homes in Massachusetts and New York; the fourteenth issue of Dishwasher, by Dishwasher Pete, containing, among other things, comics and articles by people who wash dishes for a living; issue 8 of the endlessly amusing Plotz; and the latest issues of 2600, The Hacker Quarterly; Temp Slave; Tiki News; Bamboo Girl; and Heavy Girl.

The emphasis is certainly on reading in these zines, and each is a unique world in itself. The look is primitive - there is little attention to academic rules of graphic design - and this roughness contributes to their appeal. I wonder now how my experience would have been transformed if the production were slicker, or it the prices had not reflected the light-hearted ephemerality that is a defining factor of the zine form; how different my expectation might have been if the work positioned itself in the context of fine art.

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