The Century of Artists' Books
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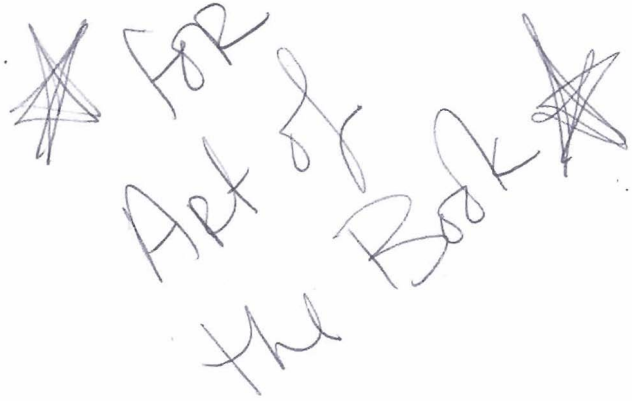

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The Artist's Book as Idea and Form

There is no doubt that the artist's book has become a developed artform in the 20th century. In many ways it could be argued that the artist's book is the quintessential 20th-century artform. Artists' books appear in every major movement in art and literature and have provided a unique means of realizing works within all of the many avant-garde, experimental, and independent groups whose contributions have defined the shape of 20th-century artistic activity. At the same time, artists' books have developed as a separate field, with a history which is only partially related to that of mainstream art. This development is particularly marked after 1945, when the artist's book has its own practitioners, theorists, critics, innovators, and visionaries. Among the many individuals to be mentioned here there are literally dozens whose achievements belong almost entirely to the realm of artists' books and whose work could sustain the kind of in-depth discussion accorded major painters, composers, poets, or other artists who work in more familiar forms.

What is unique about artists' books, however, is that with very few exceptions they really did not exist in their current form before the 20th century. However, a single definition of the the term "an artist's book" continues to be highly elusive in spite of its general currency and the proliferation of work which goes by this name. The increased popularity of artists' books can probably be attributed to the flexibility and variation of the book form, rather than to any single aesthetic or material factor. Rather than attempt a rigid or definitive characterization of artists' books, I am going to sketch out a zone of activity which I think of as "artists' books." This zone is made at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas — rather than at their limits. Instead of trying to account causally for the development of the artist's book in the 20th century, I hope to make a case for the ways in which it is the 20th-century artform par excellence.

It's easy enough to state that an artist's book is a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of a preexisting work. And also, that it is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues. However this definition raises more questions than it answers: What is an "original" work of art? Does it have to be a unique work? Can it be an edition? A multiple? Who is the maker? Is it the artist who has the idea? Or only if she or he does all of the work involved in production — printing, painting, binding, photography, or whatever else is involved? Or do each of these practitioners have to be taken into account, especially when there are complicated transformations involved in going from drawings to print, or photographs to inked plates, or when the binding has a structural form to it which has been designed or codified by someone other than the artist? What production means can be included in this definition — is a Gestetner print as valid as a means of producing art as a litho stone, a silver print, or a linoleum block? What about computer printers and xerox machines? Is a work which is made only of bound set-up sheets or other found paper a book production?1 Or one made of blank paper? Or appropriated images? Most people would agree to a common-sense definition of what is or is not a book. But with the work of artists this obvious definition soon loses its clarity. Is a book restricted to the codex form? Does it include scrolls? Tablets? Decks of cards? A block of wood with one end painted with a title, like a conventional spine? A walk-in space of oversized panels hinged together? A metaphysical concept, disembodied, but invoked in performance or ritual? While these questions address only a few aspects of an artist's book's definition, they show the immediate difficulty of trying to make a single, simple statement about what constitutes an artist's book.

If all the elements or activities which contribute to artists' books as a field are described what emerges is a space made by their intersection, one which is a zone of activity, rather than a category into which to place works by evaluating whether they meet or fail to meet certain rigid criteria. There are many of these activities: fine printing, independent publishing, the craft tradition of book arts, conceptual art, painting and other traditional arts, politically motivated art activity and activist production, performance of both traditional and experimental varieties, concrete poetry, experimental music, computer and electronic arts, and last but not least, the tradition of the illustrated book, the **livre d'artiste**. Since this last term causes the most confusion and difficulty it serves as a useful

point of departure for beginning to sketch out this zone at the intersection of, but just beyond the limits of, any of these individual fields of activity.

The **livre d'artiste** came into being as a publishing enterprise initiated by such figures as Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard, whose first productions appeared in the mid-1890s, and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler who began publishing slightly more than a decade later.2 This trend caught on among other editors who saw the opportunity to market deluxe editions which bore the name of a rising or established star in the world of visual arts or poetry (Vollard was associated with Georges Rouault and Kahnweiler with Apollinaire, Picasso, and other Cubists). Deluxe editions predate the existence of the **livre d'artiste** and books with all of the elements of the genre — large sized format, elaborate production values such as hand coloring, virtuoso printing, fine binding, use of rare materials, texts, or images which catered to a sophisticated or elite market — had long been an established part of the publishing industry.3 The **livre d'artiste** took advantage of the expanded market for visual art which had grown in the 19th century, along with other luxury markets expanded by industrial growth, the accumulation of capital, and an educated upper middle class with an appetite for fine consumer goods. The market for these books was developed as an extension of the market for painting, drawing, and sculpture. Kahnweiler was fully aware that he was creating a sideline in books which could be sold on the strength of the popularity and fame of artists whose work he dealt.

But if for editors these books were attractive in part as a new commodity, for artists they often offered the possibility to produce work which they wouldn't or couldn't normally produce themselves. This might include working in a printmaking medium, for example, or pursuing a theme which did not find an easy place in their other work. The artists whose work was featured in early **livres d'artistes** are among the foremost in 20th-century art, their names are the roster known from survey lectures and blockbuster exhibitions: Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, Joan Miro, Max Ernst, and Pablo Picasso.4 These books are finely made works, but they stop short of being artists' books. They stop just at the threshold of the conceptual space in which artists' books operate. First of all, it is rare to find a **livre d'artiste** which interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities. This is perhaps one of the most important distinguishing crite-

ria of the two forms, since artist's books are almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form. For instance, the standard distinction between image and text, generally on facing pages, is maintained in most **livres d'artistes**. By contrast to the lively innovations which abound in artists' books, the work of even recent, late 20th-century, **livres d'artistes** tend to be embalmed in excessive production values, burdened by the weight of traditional format and materials.5 The paper wrappers of these books can barely contain their thick paper pages, and the large scale of the typefaces is surrounded by a veritable swath of blank margin. The images and text often face each other like new acquaintances across the gutter, wondering how they came to be bound together for all eternity in the hushed, mute, interior of the ponderous tome.6

Most of the works produced by entrepreneurs such as Kahnweiler were initiated as the vision of an editor. The artist and writer were often contracted independently (in many cases classic texts or authors were used as the basis of a new modern visual interpretation — Ovid, Shakespeare, Dante, and Aesop were favorite staples of the **livre d'artiste** genre). Artist and writer often didn't meet, or met through the arranged connection of the project, as in some loveless mechanical nuptial of convenience. These editorial habits, however, vary considerably from individual to individual, often with positive results. The contrast between the editorial vision of Collectif Génération and that of Andrew Hoyem at Arion Press, two contemporary producers of **livres d'artistes** — both successful on their own very different terms — makes this point dramatically. Gervais Jassaud, the editor of Collectif Génération, only produces works by living writers and artists. These are previously unpublished, often hand-done or hand-written editions for which Jassaud provides the framework (the shape, size, general format of the book). The degree of collaboration and interaction is left to the artists involved. In addition, Jassaud has worked to make his collaborations and his overall program an international one to an unprecedented degree — not merely publishing artists from a wide range of locations, but also facilitating an international process of exchange. Hoyem, in contrast, has used the texts of living and classic writers, and his work in many ways is a clearer continuation of the **livre d'artiste** tradition. Though in general it is the artist's and writer's reputations which sell these books, a rare or unpublished literary text can also be a selling point.

Editors' visions tend to be market oriented — theirs is a vision whose

aesthetics are meant to guarantee the value of the product, not necessarily realize an original work. Thus the discrete nature of the elements: text, image, production (including printing, binding, typesetting, design, and so forth) are independent operations, guided by the editor, who engineers their compatibility with the necessary, consummate, taste. This third point is the telling one: the format of these works is perhaps their most characteristic feature, with a standard alternation of word and visual artwork, usually within a single spread or opening.7 This mechanical repetition of the conventional distinction between image and text returns these works to the category of illustrated books, rather than artist's books. This formula is hardly inevitable. It is interesting to note that some of the earliest examples of **livres d'artistes** were more adventurous in blurring the boundaries of image and text than the later ones. The Ambroise Vollard edition of **Parallelèment** (1900) with images by Pierre Bonnard, shows Bonnard's lithographed images weaving into the printed text, uniting the visual and verbal elements on the page. This approach is a continuation of innovations which began with Romantic printers and engravers almost a century earlier, most notably Thomas Bewick, who were intent on merging image and text in their works.8 While many **livres d'artistes** are interesting on their own terms, they are productions rather than creations, products, rather than visions, examples of a form, not interrogations of its conceptual or formal or metaphysical potential.

Any attempt to describe a heterogenous field of activities through particular criteria breaks down in the face of specific books or artists — and this is true with the distinction between artist's books and **livres d'artistes**. The work of Iliazd, a Russian avant-garde artist who became an editor of fine editions after 1945, is often closer to the conceptual form of an artist's book in its originality of vision and investigation of the book form than it is to the deluxe books it resembles through its materials and production means.9 Similarly, there are many inexpensive books whose format reproduces the juxtaposition of word and image as discrete elements in a pattern characteristic of the **livre d'artiste**. Similar problems occur with other definitions of artists' book activities.

Fine printing, for instance, can't really be subsumed under the **livre d'artiste** nor can it be absorbed into the realm of artists' books — though there are many finely printed volumes in both categories. The term "fine printing" is generally associated with letterpress, handset type, and limited editions, but also can be used to describe carefully produced work in

any print medium. There is a category of fine printing which invokes the production of limited edition works for bibliophiles concerned with well-made versions of classic texts printed on archival paper, in durable leather bindings, and so forth. These books are produced with close attention to all aspects of printing art, but are not generally innovative in form or concerned with explorations of books as an artistic concept.10 Though artists' books tend to be associated with offset or electrostatic (commonly referred to by its trade name: xerox) processes, they have also been produced through the methods of letterpress, hand binding, and relief images (woodcut, linoleum, or engraving). Widening access to a variety of printing technologies has played a part in the proliferation of artists' books, especially in the first world, where the ready availability of production means increases in every decade.11

But neither the methods nor the quality of production can be used in themselves as criteria for determining a book's identity as an artist's book. Artists use what they have access to and knowledge of. There have been some wonderfully imaginative uses of letterpress from that of the Russian Futurist Vassily Kamensky's **Tango with Cows** (Moscow, 1914), to pieces produced by an obscure pair of California letterpress printers active in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1970s: Holbrook Teter and Michael Meyers, whose independent productions had an unsurpassed creative vision, critical edge, and originality while participating in production conventions traditionally associated with fine printing. Letterpress, like offset printing or traditional darkroom techniques, requires a significant investment of time and energy and depends upon regular access in order to be acquired as a skill. However, it does not require huge amounts of capital to set up or acquire.12 Artists' books are often (though not always) produced on a shoestring budget by the artists themselves, however, letterpress is now prohibitively expensive in most situations (since it is labor intensive and thus costly when contracted out) — unless one owns and operates the equipment.13 The tactile, dimensional physicality of letterpress tends to be associated with fine printing, and fine printing with a conservative tradition, but an artist's book can certainly be well printed without losing its identity, just as bad printing is often acceptable and successful in the context of artists' books.14

The field of artists' books also has a relation to other forms of printing activity. One of these, more literary and political in its origins, is that of independent publishing. I define independent publishing as any publication effort which is mounted for the sake of bringing an edition into being which cannot find ready sponsorship in the established press or among commercial publishing houses. Largely associated with the literary realms and political activism, independent publishing allocates the power of production to anyone in possession of a press or the means to pay for printing. The term "independent" suggests an independence from commercial motives or constraints. In the 20th century much of the experimental literature which blossomed as part of modernism, the avant-garde, and other innovative aesthetic traditions, failed to find a receptive place in established publishing houses. Often authors have early work published in these venues and then are picked up by larger houses. The efforts of the British writers, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, at the Hogarth Press (established in 1917), or of John Heartfield and his brother, Weiland Herzfelde in the establishment of the Malik Verlag (also 1917), or of Caresse and Harry Crosby's Black Sun Press (begun in Paris, 1925) are a handful of the many classic, historic examples of independent publishing.15 Because such enterprises are launched with the ideal of publishing innovative, creative, or experimental work rather than making money, and are generally staffed by the editor/publishers who often also print the work, these independent publishers serve to make work available to the public which might not appear if profit were the sole publishing motive. The vast majority of creative writing, poetry, and prose is published through independent means by the labors and efforts of editors who barely break even monetarily or who subsidize their publishing work through other sources of income.16 Funding from private or public organizations sometimes provides additional help, but hardly enough to replace the initiative and determination which carry these projects through on a sustained basis. Artist's book publishing — whether by artists or by the publishers dedicated to artists' books, of which there are a significant number — is often in this financial category. This is not to suggest that artists never make money off their books, but to note that the same impetus which gives rise to independent publishing — the desire to make a voice heard, or a vision available, fuels artist's books.

The idea of the independent publisher is closely linked to that of the activist artist. Activist artists often give little thought to financial return or careerist investment (though both publishers and artists sometimes establish a name and a reputation which they can leverage to future successes as a result of these efforts). Much activist work is topical, politically

or socially motivated in its thematics, and distributed through inexpensive editions as cheaply and widely as possible. Artists with a social or political motivation for their work have frequently turned to the inexpensive multiple as a means of gaining a wider audience for the work. Books, because they have the capacity to circulate freely, are independent of any specific institutional restraints (one finds them in friends' houses, motel rooms, railroad cars, school desks). They are low maintenance, relatively long-lived, free floating objects with the capacity to convey a great deal of information, and serve as a vehicle to communicate far beyond the limits of an individual life or contacts. The notion of the book as a means of available communication is part of what informs the myth of the book as democratic multiple, in spite of the many paradoxes of production involved in this idea.17 From the Russian Futurists to the Fluxus artists to the Press at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, to the Lower East Side Print Shop in New York, the idea of making the book a tool of independent, activist thought has been one of the persistent elements of the mystique of the artist's book. That artists' books can facilitate a change of consciousness is clear, as with any other symbolic form be it poetry, visual arts, or music; whether such work can result in a change of political structure and policy opens the door to another set of debates about the role and function of art in the 20th century which cannot be adequately addressed here.

It would be hard to find an art movement in the 20th century which does not have some component of the artist's book attached to it, though in some cases this definition would have to be stretched to include journals, ephemera, or other independent publications.18 For example, Guillaume Apollinaire and Pierre Albert-Birot produced books in the context of Cubist art while Russian and Italian Futurism had many practitioners committed to books as a major part of their work from Velimir Khlebnikov and Natalia Goncharova to Franceso Depero and Filippo Marinetti.19 A path could be traced which would include Expressionism, Surrealism in Western and Eastern Europe, Dada in Europe and the United States, as well as post-war movements such as Lettrism, Fluxus, Pop art, Conceptualism, Minimalism, the Women's Art Movement, and Postmodernism to the present mainstream artworld concern with multiculturalism and identity politics.20 It is clear that books played a part in other movements as well, including the activities of experimental musicians such as John Cage and Henri Chopin, performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann,

Robert Morris, Vito Acconci, artists involved with systemic work, such as Mario Merz, Ed Ruscha, or Sol Lewitt and so on. This list would be exhaustingly long if it were complete and in spite of that fact, artists' books as a genre have not been surveyed, codified, or critically incorporated into the history of 20th-century art.21 These works will appear here but they will be treated as books and as examples of artistic involvement with the book as a form, rather than as attributes or sidelines of the movements with which the artists are associated. The sensibility of Sol Lewitt or Marcel Duchamp or Hanne Darboven is indissoluble from the aesthetic issues which form the mainstream context for their work, but their engagement with the book as a form has been more than incidental. Among mainstream artists, these are people who have looked at the book as a form to interrogate, not merely a vehicle for reproduction.

It is the fact of this engagement as a major feature of art of the 20th century which argues for the identity of artists' books as a unique phenomenon of the era. To an unprecedented degree books have served to express aspects of mainstream art which were not able to find expression in the form of wall pieces, performances, or sculpture. Dick Higgins has even suggested that the book as a form of intermedia (to use his term), combines all of these modes of art in a characteristically new way.22 In some cases artists have made use of the documentary potential of the book form, while in others they have engaged with the more subtle and complicated fact of the book's capacity to be a highly malleable, versatile form of expression. Not every book made by an artist is an artist's book, in spite of the old Duchampian adage that art is what an artist says it is. It is also as true in the late part of 20th century as it was in the early decades that books are often produced on the strength of an artist's capacity to generate sales, and books are a cheap sideline for many galleries. A mere compendium of images, a portfolio of prints, an incidental collection of images original or appropriated, is not always an artist's book, though the terms on which the distinction may be sustained are often vague. The final criteria for definition resides in the informed viewer, who has to determine the extent to which a book work makes integral use of the specific features of this form. The desire to engage with the elusive character of what constitutes a book is part of the impetus for my current project: to seek critical terms on which to examine a book's book-ness, its identity as a set of aesthetic functions, cultural operations, formal conceptions, and metaphysical spaces.

Just as books have served to extend the possibilities of visual arts, performance, and music, they have also offered a unique conceptual possibility to the poet.23 Concrete poets have engaged with books as a conceptual space, one which by its form and finitude, its structural specificity and visual restraints, has offered a unique means of realizing particular works. While many concrete poets have worked with sculptural elements, sound, or at the level of the single, flat sheet or broadside, there are a substantial number who have used books as the form for their work. Again, not every concrete poet is a book artist, and not every concrete work is an artist's book, but there are works which demonstrate the ways in which concrete poets have been able to extend the parameters of what a book does as a verbal field in a manner which also extends the possibilities of the way an artist's book can function as a poetic text.

The crafts of book arts have also burgeoned in the latter part of the 20th century. Workshops and classes in binding, papermaking, book structures, and so forth are a major staple of centers devoted to book arts.24 Though structure is an important component of a successful book the craft aspect of book production is not sufficient in itself to constitute the substance of an artist's book. Attention to materials, their interactions, and the content bound within the book are an integral feature of a book, but as with other aspects of production, artists' books tend to bend and stretch all the rules and conventions of craft decorum. One can trace the influence of individual practitioners among certain communities of artists involved with books — for instance, the popularization of certain structures included in Keith Smith's texts on book production. The contribution of Smith, and others who have taught extensively such as Hedi Kyle, or Walter Hamady, in their various past and present arenas of influence, is a visible feature of artists' books in their current incarnation. But there are also works produced from far outside this tradition which succeed without its influence, as there are many works produced as an expression of craft which fall short of being artists' books. An artist's book has to be more than a solid craft production or it falls back into the same category as the **livre d'artiste** or fine print work. An artist's book should not be formulaic — it might be generic, of a familiar type or established category of artists' books and make its contribution without innovating formally, and it might be wildly innovative and sloppy and badly made and in many ways fall short of perfection or even good realization — but ultimately an artist's book has to have some conviction, some soul, some reason to be

and **to be a book** in order to succeed. It is particularly difficult to keep the craft tradition of book arts and the expressive tradition of the artist's book apart — nor is there any need to — but they should not be confused with each other.

Given the above discussion, it is not surprising that the history of the artist's book is mapped in a wide variety of ways by different scholars and critics. Even among those writers whose general sense of what constitutes an artist's book makes a clear distinction between this form and that of, say, the **livre d'artiste**, there is a tendency to make what seems like an arbitrary and too definitive point of origin. Most particularly the book **Twenty-six Gasoline Stations**, by Ed Ruscha has become a cliche in critical works trying to establish a history of artists' books. There is some reason for this — since Ruscha's work arguably breaks new ground in embodying and defining an artist's book. But it seems counterproductive to try to make a single point of demarcation for this complex history. It seems more useful and interesting to recognize that by the time Ruscha's work was produced (the date of the first edition is 1962) there was already a historical precedent in examples from Russian Futurism through Surrealism to the American avant-garde, from both artistic and literary traditions. To state that the artist's book comes into being through the work of Ruscha, and to credit him with the idea, concept, and form, makes an erroneous foundation for this history on two counts. First, the artist's book has to be understood as a highly mutable form, one which cannot be definitively pinned down by formal characteristics (such as the inexpensive printing and small format of Ruscha's work). The book form is always under investigation by artists who reach into the various traditions described above, as well as into new realms of material expression and creative form. More importantly, this approach to history is hopelessly beleaguered by an old-fashioned notion, one in which there are founding fathers who beget whole traditions through their influence. I prefer to think of the artist's book as a field which emerges with many spontaneous points of origin and originality. This is a field in which there are underground, informal, or personal networks which allow growth to surface in a new environment, or moment, or through a chance encounter with a work, or an artist. This is also a field in which there are always inventors and numerous mini-genealogies and clusters, but a field which belies the linear notion of a history with a single point of origin.

That this history has become more complicated since the middle of this

century is quite clear. Where the artist's book has to be coaxed from its art or literary context in the early part of the century it becomes so full-blown and prolific a form afterward that only a general overview or alternately an exhaustively detailed description of activity will suffice to describe that development. I have chosen the former model. Briefly, here is the way I see the post-war history: In the late 1940s and early 1950s there are a number of artists who begin to explore books in a serious way. These include the CoBrA artists in Denmark, Belgium, and Holland as well as the French Lettrists, led by Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaitre, whose major experimental work is produced from 1948 through the 1950s. The Concrete poets in Brazil, particularly Augusto and Haroldo De Campos, and in Germany and France, also begin working actively with books in the 1950s. By the late 1950s, artists working in experimental music, performance, and other non-traditional forms take up book arts within the context of Fluxus soon after its first events in the early 1960s. There were other localized or individual art formations of the same period — the work of the French composer, Henri Chopin, for example, or Bern Porter the American practitioner of found poetry. Dieter Roth, arguably the most significantly imaginative post-war European book artist, began his work with the book in the 1950s. These are scattered points of activity some of which came into being without connections to each other, while others spun off as part of the large loosely interrelated post-war avant-garde.

In the 1960s books as an artist's medium took off in the United States and Europe. They fit the sensibility of the 1960s alternative scene, whether produced independently by artists or by galleries as an extension of an exhibition, also giving rise to the hybrid genre of the catalogue as artist's book. The proliferation of works which use the small format and inexpensive production methods bespeaks the transformation of print technology as much as the transformation of conceptual sensibility which promotes this expansion. Offset printing and later electrostatic reproduction were further complemented by the increasingly available modes of photographic and electronic type setting. The availability of the Multi-lith, a small, affordable offset press, as a standard job shop item, as well as the rapid transformation of the printing industry from high-speed letterpress to offset (many newspapers and magazines, such as the **New York Times** and **Time** magazine, continued using relief printing until the 1970s, only replacing this with offset equipment as electronic typesetting became viable), were all developments which provided the means for artists to

produce inexpensive multiples.[25] The development of artists' books was not determined by technological advances but these changes did permit easier access to production than had been the case earlier in the century. In the 1970s major centers for the production of artists' books were established, most notably Visual Studies Workshop (in Rochester, New York), Nexus Press (in Atlanta, Georgia), the New York Center for the Book Arts, Pacific Center for the Book Arts (in the San Francisco Bay Area), Printed Matter (in New York City), the Graphic Arts Press in the Woman's Building (in Los Angeles), and The Writers Center (in Bethesda, Maryland). Other institutional sites developed as well within art school and university programs in the arts, museum and library collections, and private collections. By the 1970s, then, the artist's book had come of age.

By the late 1970s, however, another area of book related activity began to develop a highly visible profile: book-like objects or book sculpture. Their proliferation was apparent in the U.S. in both New York and California, and in Europe as well. This development has fewer precedents in the history of 20th-century arts than does the artist's book. One can point to several works by Duchamp (as always) — such as his altered book, **Do Touch**, with the female breast cast on its cover, or even his large **Green Box** as a conceptual book, and the boxes of Joseph Cornell have a formal and conceptual relation to the sculptural "book." In the 1950s, Dieter Roth shredded paper, boiled it, and filled animal intestines to make "literary sausages." Large scale book works which are as much installation and performance as object were a part of 1960s Fluxus and other investigations. But the recent increase in these productions marks an intensifying exchange between artists who make books and the world of mainstream visual art. In the post-war period the arts gradually turn away from traditional media forms and categories so that the synthetic possibilities seen in the domain of artist's books, and this hybridization of book as object, seem completely consistent with its trends.

In the 1980s, following this wave of sculptural work, one begins to see installation pieces which are ambitious in scale and physical complexity, closet size to room size, with video, computers, and any moment now a virtual reality apparatus. Many of these are made by artists who had previously been involved with artists' books, or who use books as an integral aspect of these installations. Here I am thinking of the Buzz Spector's frozen edition of Sigmund Freud's work, Janet Zweig's computer driven kinetic sculptures, Karen Wirth and Robert Lawrence's **How to Make an**

Antique, Marshall Reese and Nora Ligorano's **Bible Belt**, among others. Much of this work poses important questions for the identity of a book and its cultural, social, poetic, or aesthetic functions, but it could not be accomodated here without stretching the parameters of my discussion into an awkward shape. Some of these are compelling and original works, some are one-liners produced at the expense of books as cultural artifacts, some are fascinating, fetishistic, or conceptual pieces — but for the purposes of this study, I am keeping them just beyond the zone of artists' books. I am concentrating here on understanding what a book is when it functions as a book, when it provides a reading or viewing experience sequenced into a finite space of text and or images. To extend beyond this would dilute the focus of this book.

In addition, I am convinced that many of these works belong more to the world of sculpture or installation art than to the world of books. They may function as icons of book-ness or book identity, but not provide an experience associated with books themselves. Electronic media, however, pose other, equally complex problems. The book as an electronic form — whether in hypertext, CD-ROM, or as an infinite and continually mutating archive of collective memory and space — is already functioning as an extension of the artist's book form. The issues raised by this medium seem too imperative to leave aside, and so will find their, albeit limited, place in this discussion.

In closing, a few final remarks. Most attempts to define an artist's book which I have encountered are hopelessly flawed — they are either too vague ("a book made by an artist"26) or too specific ("it can't be a limited edition"27). Artists' books take every possible form, participate in every possible convention of book making, every possible "ism" of mainstream art and literature, every possible mode of production, every shape, every degree of ephemerality or archival durability. There are no specific criteria for defining what an artist's book is, but there are many criteria for defining what it is not, or what it partakes of, or what it distinguishes itself from. In mapping out this initial definition my intention has been to demonstrate the incredible richness of artists' books as a form which draws upon a wide spectrum of artistic activities, and yet, duplicates none of them. Artists' books are a unique genre, ultimately a genre which is as much about itself, its own forms and traditions, as any other artform or activity. But it is a genre as little bound by constraints of medium or form as those more familiar rubrics "painting" and "sculpture." It is an area

which needs description, investigation, and critical attention before its specificity will emerge. And that is the point of this project: to engage with books which are artists' books in order to allow that specific space of activity, somewhere at the intersection and boundaries and limits of all of the above activities, to acquire its own particular definition.

1 **Set-up sheets** are the sheets a printer uses to "set-up" the press: to get inking, pressure, position, registration or other elements of the printing process coordinated. Many printers reuse these sheets several times, creating elaborate overprinting effects of random patterns which can be treated as "found art" or poetry, cut up, bound, and made into a book. Dieter Roth used this approach in a number of works, and it is an idea which I have seen occur to many people who see the set-up sheets around a press.

2 There are other, earlier examples as well, but these figures mark the beginning of 20th-century activity and a new clear identity within the artworld, rather than next to or tangential to it.

3 See William Strachan, **The Artist and the Book in France**, as an introduction to this history, or Douglas McMurtrie's **The Book: The Story of Printing and Bookmaking**. Elaborate folio and elephant folio volumes with colored plates were an old concept which found a broader audience in the 19th century. One such publication which is sufficiently well known to serve as an example is the **Birds of America** from drawings of John James Audubon — and the large format and elaborate work in this edition could be found in many other volumes of natural history, catalogues of architectural monuments, classical statuary — even the history of writing merited large-scale publications with high production values. In fact, deluxe editions and bindings were the norm before the small, inexpensive edition was initiated by the Dutch printing house of Elzevir in the 17th century. Daniel Berkeley Updike's **Printing Types** is still the standard reference in typographic history.

4 The misnamed exhibition, **A Century of Artists Books**, curated by Riva Castleman, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the winter of 1994-95, is a representative selection of 20th-century **livres d'artiste**. There are a few anomalies in her exhibition, works which are artists' books, which probably found their way down the elevator from the MoMA Library collection of several thousand artists' books.

5 This point is important because the **livre d'artiste** was a radical innovation at the end of the 19th century but has gone brain dead through the codification of its conventions.

6 Binding fashions differ from era to era and place to place: American bindings tend to be excessively heavy, as if to add importance to these works, while English binders make use of lighter board.

7 The term **opening** refers to the space of an open codex-style book, a **spread** is generally an opening of this sort which preserves the continuity of the sheet across the

gutter, so that an image or text could be printed on that sheet without the need to cope with the gutter as a disjunctive break.

8 Henri Zerner and Charles Rosen, **Realism and Romanticism** (Norton, 1984), especially Chapter III, "The Romantic Vignette and Thomas Bewick."

9 Iliazd was born Ilia Zdanevich in Tiflis, Georgia, in 1894. There are other editors of artists' books who produce work which is not merely **livres d'artistes**, such as Hansjörg Mayer, Frances Butler and Alastair Johnston (Poltroon Press), or Simon Cutts and Erica Van Horn (Coracle).

10 I am thinking of books like those generally produced for the Limited Editions Club. These are different from **livres d'artiste** in that though they may be illustrated, they are generally not lavish in size, or focusing on an artist's work, but are reissues of Great Books or Modern Classics, as the case may be. They are marketed to readers or those who like their library shelves to proclaim their literacy rather than to art collectors. The books are not really expensive — they are more costly than the average trade book, but they are far from a fine arts market.

11 The relationships between technology and the industrial base in the first world, including specific relations among capital, labor, markets, and production means is almost never considered as an aspect of the proliferation of artists's books. Simply on the level of transformations of technology these connections are manifest in every aspect of book production — for instance, consider the possibilities which phototypesetting, computer generated type, and desktop publishing have made available for the manipulation of the text on a page, not to mention the ways in which the commercial industry of advertising has pushed design possibilities. There is a tendency to write the history of artists' books — or, even, of related activity like the history of **livres d'artistes** — as if the specific first world context were irrelevant. This is an area where the work of someone like Felipe Ehrenberg would provide a particularly rich study since his artistic activity spans first and third world cultural, social, and economic fields. He has been involved with teaching book arts and printing in a wide variety of circumstances and communities.

12 It's fair to say that letterpress is taken up for a variety of reasons — some people like the elegance of its product, some find it easy enough to learn and not too mechanically intimidating, some merely have access to it and it works. I am not stigmatizing the medium with any particular character here — but it does get characterzed because of the association with the tradition of the deluxe edition.

13 Ann Chamberlain passed on some interesting information to me when I was working with her on an essay to accompany an exhibition she curated at Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco in 1992. She made the point that in Mexico City, one can obtain the skills of letterpress job printers very inexpensively since they set up in the arcades of a particular public square and will print on demand, on the spot, so that many book artists avail themselves of this service rather than print their own texts or acquire the means to do so. This is an anecdote which demonstrates the differences in the economics of printing techonology and availability in different cultural locations. There

are also many artists making books who developed access to equipment by working in print shops in a day job and printing their own work in off hours.

14 Clifton Meador has remarked on how great "bad" printing is — or can be in the right situation. Such "bad" printing reveals itself to the knowledgeable eye, often showing effects of the manipulation of the printing process with respect to pressure, water, inking and so forth. **Fine Print**, a journal which was established in San Francisco by Sandra Kirschenbaum in 1975, and ran for about fifteen years, was one relatively accessible contemporary arena for the discussion of the work of fine print presses, as was the short-lived **Bookways**, published by W. Thomas Taylor. Nancy Princenthal has single-handedly brought attention to actual artists' books in her column in **Print Collector's Newsletter** over the years, but more often PCN reviews **livres d'artistes** for their audience of print collectors. There are other publications which address this genre in the international market — such as the **Nouvelles de l'Estampe**, of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, not to mention the many catalogues of antiquarian dealers catering to bibliophiles for whom artists' books are still, often, an unknown, uncharted region.

15 Here again there is a link, rather than a causal relation, between changes in the printing industry and artistic activity, in one important respect. It was the mass production of type, made possible by breakthroughs in casting and typefounding, which permitted the spread of printing and establishment of small private shops which could acquire standard sized type from commercial foundries.

16 Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop's Burning Deck Press in Providence is a longstanding example of this kind of ongoing committment.

17 I have written about this paradox in the catalogue essay for Brad Freeman's exhibition **Offset: Artists' Books and Prints** (1993), and also in the essay "Artists Books and the Cultural Status of the Book," in **The Journal of Communication**, special issue edited by Sandra Braman, Winter 1994,Vol. 44, No. 1, but I will return to this later, in the section which explores ideas about production.

18 There are, however, exceptions to any such bold statement. I can think of very few artists' books associated with Abstract Expressionism in its first wave, for instance, but these exceptions are few and far between.

19 Pierre Albert-Birot is another forgotten figure, editor of a Parisian journal of the 1910s titled **SIC**, or **Sons Idees Couleurs (Sounds Ideas Colors)**, as well as of numerous books of his own publication which included visual poems, typographic experiments, and theatrical scripts. Susan Compton's **Worldbackwards**, (British Museum, 1978) and her **Russian Avant-Garde Books 1917 to 1934** (MIT University Press, 1992) are a good point of departure for the Russian materials. The Italian work is also well documented in Giovanni Lista's **Futurisme** (L'Age D'Homme, 1973) among other sources, but Marjorie Perloff's **The Futurist Moment**, (University of Chicago Press, 1986) and the 1993 catalogue of a monumental exhibition in Marseille, **Poesure et Peintrie** [sic] and the older Herbert Spencer volumes on experimental and avant-garde typography, **Pioneers of Modern Typography** (Lund Humphries, 1969)and The

Liberated Page (Bedford, 1987) are also invaluable indexes to this material; see also my The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art Practice (University of Chicago, 1994) though it does not deal with books as much as typographic work.

20 In spite of this activity the literature is small. There are many articles, exhibition catalogues, and ephemeral publications, but the number of books devoted to artists' books can be figured on the fingers of both hands. Among these is a major contribution by Renée Riese Hubert, Surrealism and the Book (University of California, 1988). But for the post-1945 period, there is no survey text or major work devoted exclusively to artists' books except the Joan Lyons (ed.) Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook (Visual Studies Workshop and Peregine Press, 1984).

21 The reasons for this are not easy to pin down. The fact that books take up less physical space than paintings or sculptures, are less immediately commanding, and also, generally, more complicated and intricate than other forms of art may be part of their having been granted a "minor" status. The equation of large scale art with importance is certainly a feature of post-1945 art, so that the intimate, personal scale of a book is dwarfed in comparison. There is, again, the market aspect — books tend to sell in a different, generally lower price bracket than paintings or sculptures which perpetuates their perception as of lesser value in a somewhat vicious circle. When one realizes that a single book can consist of what are essentially whole suites of prints, painted pages, or photographs it is interesting to note that they often sell for far less than a single piece of wall art in a similar medium.

22 Dick Higgins, "Intermedia" in foew&ombwhnw, (Something Else Press, NY, 1969).

23 The literary engagement with the book form is outside my scope. I would have to include every poet who ever put a line of type at a diagonal or used calculated typewriter spacing to be fair to the field. The work of Jerome McGann and Michael Davidson, as well as Marjorie Perloff and Jerome Rothenberg, Emmett Williams, Mary Ellen Solt, and Dick Higgins, are good points of departure for those interested in this area.

24 Visual Studies Workshop, The Minnesota Center for Book Arts, the New York Center for Book Arts, Pacific Center.for the Book Arts, and Pyramid Atlantic to name a few.

25 The term "inexpensive" is deceiving — though printing costs in the 1960s and 70s were considerably lower than they are in the 1990s; I have discussed this point at length elsewhere, as in Offset (1993), but the basic issue is that books which sell at an affordable price tend to require considerable cash up front, often costs not reclaimable given the problems of distribution, sale, and lack of audience in the artist's book world.

26 Lawrence Weiner, at the Museum of Modern Art panel, "Artists' Books at the End of a Dream" in May 1994, using the Duchampian "if an artist made it it's art" remark. In this case, however, I have to say that if it ain't a book, it ain't a book, no matter what. Though I still prefer Weiner's line to the hopeless muddle of, for instance, Riva Castleman, who seemed unable to distingush artist's books from livres d'artistes or just plain old illustrated books.

27 This comes from Anne Moeglin-Delcroix "Qu'est-ce qu'un livre d'artiste?" from the publication of the Actes du Colloque of the 1991 Biennale du Livre d'Artiste, in Uzerche, which has much to recommend it, but her attempt to define an artist's book is very limited and literal. I know of many great artist's books which are in limited editions, and which are most emphatically not livres d'artistes in spite of that, to feel that such criteria can be used. They seem objective, empirical, and desirable, but end up being arbitrary markers of distinction among otherwise common objects.