# What a Book Is

### Building a vocabulary and contextual knowledge for the analysis.

“In the old art the writer writes texts.  
In the new art the writer makes books.”

* Ulises Carrión

“The New Art of Making Books,” is a conceptual manifesto published in 1975 in Europe that draws from lines of thought associated with linguistics, literature, concrete poetry, and the Fluxus movement. A structural motif throughout this essay is the parallel conversation outlining what the “old art” of making books is and asserting a new approach to the medium. Drawing on the general perceptions of books, Carrión identifies that in a traditional book there is a distinction between the author of the text and the creator of the physical book. In the new art, the author and creator are one.

**“**A book may be the accidental container of a text…”

* *Ulises Carrión*

What may sound like a cynical statement about books holds a deep truth about the evolution of the book form. In Amaranth Borsuk’s, “The Book,” she writes that a book is a “portable data storage and distribution method.” From the clay tablets of Sumer to the new releases of Getty Publications, books have been used to hold information and tell a story. A very abbreviated description for the evolution to the codex[[1]](#footnote-1) proceeds as follows:

Clay Tablet

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More malleable material like Papyrus

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Scroll

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Accordian fold

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Codex

The shift from oral to written language was an important milestone in human history and gave rise to various physical mediums for record keeping. It all began with the clay tablet that arose in Sumer between 8500 and 3000 BCE as the earliest example of this shift.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other parts of the world, more malleable materials like papyrus evolved. With the advent of more malleable materials, the scroll form developed for ease of transportation. While the scroll was much easier to transport than a trailing leaf of papyrus, it was difficult to unfurl and read. The accordion fold developed for ease of reading allowing for segmented portions of the text to be read at a time. Through binding the accordion form, the codex as we know it today evolved.[[3]](#footnote-3) As bookworks,[[4]](#footnote-4) also referred to as artists books, come into the picture, they play with the concept of what constitutes a book and how to push the boundaries of a medium that has evolved over time.

“A book is a space-time sequence.”

* Ulises Carrión

1. A codex is a book form characterized as a block of pages bound on one side in between covers. This is the most common bookform present-day. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Book Amaranth Borsuk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Book Amaranth Borsuk [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bookworks is a term Ulises Carrión uses to describe books that are created with the intention of using the book as a medium rather than a container of text [↑](#footnote-ref-4)