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FiGURing THE WORD

Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics

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tribulations of sanctity, betrayal, violation, and the mutilated record all bound into the affective legacy of the Book not merely as Object—as far as I am concerned, any book with its pages glued shut is not engaged in a dialogue—but Book as Topic as Subject as Prospect and Charge.

In the end, the voices synthesize their response: And finally, not least, the endlessly mutating status of the book as a commodity which identifies itself with confusion these days—the portable companion, the fetishized original, the almost-a-portfolio, the tale of the literal, the visual, the virtual—all vying for a place in the marketplace of salable, tradable, identifiable items for consumption, sale, and resale. The book is value, the blue book, in itself and for others, the guest book, the social register, the family album, the scrapbook, the black book whose social and cultural functions weaving in and out its functional and ideational identity. What is the book to be, now, in the interspace of hyperelectronic nodes? A nexus of events? A momentary intersection of concerns? An immaterial form of non-record of what might have been ideas or events? Or a new form of the Mallarméan mutation, that final, realized Book which is the full equivalent of both the world and the self, the total spiritual symbol of knowledge as complete, replete, and yet, satisfyingly bounded into itself. A whole. Or is it instead to be an endless fragmentation, in which we all, each, have our part to play in writing, scribing, projecting, painting ourselves as a place in the constellation of a synaesthetic newspeak.

The book remains. That, I think, has been the cause of my attachment to it. The fact of its independent life, its capacity to go out from the shop, the house, the office, and live on its own. As Todd Walker says, the joy of it all is that you can find it again, years later, on a shelf, and its still works—without batteries, lights, or electricity, it makes itself available again, as a new experience, a new encounter.

Written for a symposium organized by Charles Alexander at Minnesota Center for the Book Arts, Spring 1994. First published in the volume of essays, Talking the Boundless Book, *1995.*

The Myth of the Democratic Multiple

"Usually inexpensive in price, modest in format, and ambitious in scope, the artist's book is also a fragile vehicle for a weighty load of hopes and ideals: it is considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience."[1] With these words, Lucy Lippard defined the ambitions linked to the enterprise of artists' books—which she characterized as a product of 1960s counter-culture idealism. At the end of that same piece, written in 1976, Lippard said, "One day I'd like to see artists' books ensconced in supermarkets, drugstores, and airports, and, not incidentally, to see artists able to profit economically from broad communication rather than from lack of it."[2]

The idea of the democratic multiple was one of the founding myths of artists' books in their incarnation as mass-produced works. Artists' books were to counter the traditions of fine press, limited edition *livres d'artistes,* escape the institutional context of galleries, fly in the face of print and photographic protocol, and circumvent the established order of the fine art system. Few artists' books conformed to the letter of this particular orthodoxy and in the late 1990s artists' books are far more hybrid and varied in form, borrowing eclectically from every conceivable lineage of printing and publishing history. The rubric now covers the full spectrum from expensively-produced limited editions to inexpensive multiples. But partisans of the democratic multiple continue to invoke its image as the one true identity for artists' books. Such advocates rarely address, head-on, the many questions which have plagued producers of these books over the years as they have struggled to cope with the realities of translating the theoretical ideal into practice. The history of artists' book publishing is strewn with the failures of this project in aesthetic, political, and economic terms while being haunted by a rhetoric asserting that only the democratic multiple can save artists' books from the charge of elitism.

There were several tenets which combined in the original conception of the democratic multiple. The first of these was aesthetic: the book was an ordinary object. Its mass-produced format conformed to the then prevailing minimalist idea of a fabricated, industrial product

which offered an alternative to the fine art traditions of the hand-crafted object. As a dominant feature of 1960s aesthetics, this ideal of anti-artisanal production asserted an anti-professionalism as well. A book which appeared to be standard in all respects—the paradigm of the genre usually cited is Ed Ruscha's 1963 *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*—supported the possibility that anyone might be a producer as well as a consumer. Supposedly banal imagery and low-level design were key elements of this aesthetic sensibility, a kind of sham flat-footedness which belied its own privileged status of production. That such effects were calculated, highly determined, aesthetic choices intended to create the image of the anti-professional work, was a point lost in the rhetoric of the moment.

Aside from the aesthetics of its production, the democratic multiple bore the weight of a political charge: it was meant to circulate freely outside the gallery system, beyond the elite limits of an in-crowd art going audience and patrons. The assumption that books could circulate in such a way derives in part from their physical autonomy, their capacity to be disseminated into the world as independent objects (unlike paintings or sculptures which generally circulate with more difficulty and more attention to their provenance, location, and attribution). While that idea worked fine in the abstract, in reality it depended upon creating a system of distribution and upon finding an interested audience for these works which were at least as esoteric in many cases as the most obscure fine art objects. To this day there are plenty of viewers who respond to artists' books with puzzlement, dismay, confusion, and/or outright hostility. The fallacy of the supermarket distribution network envisoned by Lippard was not merely that there wasn't a structure in place to facilitate it, but that even if there had been, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* or Suzanne Lacy's *Rape Is . . .* (1976) would never have leaped to the eye and hand of the casual shopper with the same easy rapidity as the *National Enquirer*. If the bewildering disorientation, which the very ordinariness of the artist's book induces by virtue of subverting the familiar form with an unfamiliar content, is part of these works' definition of success, then the accompanying reality is that many viewers simply didn't get the jokes or the effects. Like most late 20th century artwork, the artist's book assumes a sophisticated artworld viewer initiated into the play with conventions and their subversion which characterizes much of the work of the advanced guard.

But perhaps the fallacy least evident in the production of books in "affordable" multiples, the supposedly "democratic" form of the book, is the economic one. The question of affordability has two aspects—affordable for the producer and for the consumer. Though the democratic multiple was designed to sell cheaply ($5 to $20), in largish unnumbered editions (500 to 5000 copies), it was expensive to produce. The per unit cost might be affordably low, but the up front capital expenditure was significant ($1000 to $10,000 or more). By contrast, a limited edition book or one of a kind work has a relatively low up-front capital expenditure. For artists with access to an offset press and possessing pre-press production skills, these costs could be reduced to the price of film, plates, ink, chemicals, paper, and binding materials. But the idea that even these costs are neglible would be quickly dispelled by a glance at receipts and accounts. For the cost of producing a single offset artist's book, one can fit out a basic letterpress shop (or build canvases for a year, or buy a high-end computer with full graphics capability, a scanner, large monitor, and color printer). The problem of finding an audience and of producing sellable works remains to be solved, but in the production of the mythic democratic multiple, the issue of affordability is seriously shifted in favor of the audience. In the production of limited edition or one of a kind works it is shifted towards the artist. In both cases, the cost of the artist's labor is not factored into these equations, but the devaluation of the creative activity in offset printing is a regular feature of the assessment of value. In the contrast of offset and letterpress editions a "the machine does it" attitude seems to prevail with respect to the former while a hand-made aesthetic attaches to the latter. This is a holdover from the use of offset in the 1960s when the artist's-book-as-industrial-product downplayed the aesthetic qualities of standard, commercial modes of reproduction.[3]

Still, there is good reason why the political agenda which motivated the democratic multiple remains a persistent element of ongoing rhetoric within the field of artists' books. A notion of empowerment aligns with acquiring the skills and means of print production. A.J. Liebling's famous quote, "The freedom of the press belongs to whoever owns one," continues to resonate even in an era of electronic communication—or maybe especially. The legitimacy which print confers on the individual word is certainly confirmed in the era of desktop publishing and the authority which the book format imposes on its contents

is very real in general, public perception. Books continue to have the power to introduce non-standard thought into the arena of public discourse through the Trojan horse of an ordinary appearance. Books provide a vehicle for affirmation, information, and enlightenment across a wide spectrum of points of view and belief systems. And this will be true as long as the book remains imbued with its present authority as a cultural icon.

There are historical precedents for using the book for subversive and liberatory activities, particularly among the artists of the early 20th century Russian avant-garde such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Natalia Goncharova, and Vassily Kamensky. In the 1910s in particular, artists made works by any and every available means in editions which were stenciled, lithographed, letterpress printed, handmade, or reproduced on primitive mimeo-type equipment. In editions from ten to five hundred copies, these works were distributed by hand, among friends and companions, or sold very cheaply in order to get them into the world.[4] Like the leafletting activities and independent magazine productions of Italian Futurists or German Dada artists, these attempts to use publishing to spread radical art ideas met with mixed success but satisfied the desire to break through the perceived (and real) limitations of the established audience of fine art patrons and viewers. Ironically, these ephemeral works now sell for high price tags, their author-publishers long gone, and their political impact muted by the fact that the context in which they might communicate this original meaning has vanished. They now function as fetishized art objects, rare and valuable, the very opposite of their originally intended identity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, putting artists' books into printed and bound form and getting them into circulation proved to be widely different activities. If the project of the democratic multiple is to a significant extent a failed one, it is in part because the means of distribution were so slow and fragmentary that publisher-artists could not recoup their original expenditures—or did so only over a very long period of time. The books didn't get out. When they did, they sold in small numbers, were paid for at a slow rate with a high percentage of sale price going to commission. While subsidizing one's production is a normal expectation on the part of most artists, the boxes of unsold stock under the bed or in the basement were a continual reminder that what had gone unsold was likely to remain unread, unwanted, and ineffectual in

its place in the world. The exception to this was the work of those well-known artists who embraced the form. The products of blue-chip artists were not always the most interesting works in the field and were frequently hybrid forms doubling as catalogues for an exhibition, publisher- or dealer-driven, rather than artist-initiated works. But these found an audience the way artists' prints did—as the inexpensive side-line to the mainstream markets. The real failure was that the audience for artists' books simply failed to materialize. Where were these masses who supposedly hungered for innovative, original, works of portable art in the form of inexpensive multiples? They were probably out buying posters of Impressionist paintings and culture industry celebrities.

In spite of this rather dour assessment of the fate of the democratic multiple, it is important to note that there were and are a number of presses and individuals committed to the idea. There are also a significant number of artists who have modified or transformed their practice over time to reflect their own changed attitudes with respect to the earlier utopian expectation of what the artist's book might be. There are presses which continue to support the democratic multiple as a principle and a reality: Simon Cutts (in recent years, with Erica Van Horn) has maintained Coracle Press (Norfolk, London, and Ireland) with an unwavering commitment to the affordable multiple since its inception in the mid 1970s. Likewise, Telfer Stokes, frequently in collaboration with Helen Douglas, has run WeProductions (Yarrow, Scotland) with the idea that their books are offset editions whose prices make them competitive with trade cloth and paperbacks. Other artists abandoned the production of such works after a long spell of highly original and creative publishing, such as Conrad Gleber who, with Jim Snitzer, operated Chicago Books for over ten years (mainly in the 1970s). The rising and falling fortunes of Printed Matter Bookstore at DIA, in New York City, whose founding was a product of the original 1970s idealism, can be mapped as a history of the checks and difficulties which have met the mythic concept of the democratic multiple in its many incarnations over the years. The struggle has frequently been frustrating. As an institution with a unique identity in the field, Printed Matter Bookstore has been called upon to serve any number of roles—bookstore, distributor, archive, reading room, community center, and gallery space—while struggling to meet rent, wages, overhead, and payment schedules.[5] Their situation has to be read as symptomatic of the fate of the larger

vision of artists' books as affordable multiples since their commitment from the beginning has been to the dissemination of these works.

Many artists who produced affordable editions for years now either supplement their inexpensive editions with high end works in limited numbers, make one of a kind works which sell in a fine art market, or seek a workable compromise between sustained individual investment of time and money and some kind of return. The idea that artists who don't make money are somehow more pure and noble than those who aspire to gain just recompense for their efforts was already dispelled in Lippard's insightful statement. Artists like Phil Zimmermann, Todd Walker, and Susan King—to name only a few—continue to wrestle with the conflicts and paradoxes of offset production, and their own earlier commitment to the affordable multiple. This is not an issue of selling out—since there is no market to sell out of or into, but of coming to terms with the realities of production costs and audience. Artworld champions of the offset multiple, John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, and Ed Ruscha, have made their own compromises with their original positions and produced limited edition works with fine art publishers. What has become glaringly clear, in the 30-some years since the democratic multiple was announced, is that not only is it almost impossible to make money as a producer of inexpensive artists' books, but also that it's difficult even to break even. And, to add insult to injury, it has tended to be the high end products which command critical attention because they come into the world announcing their "importance" in their production values (expensive paper, binding, large formats, "hand" printing). But it is still true that many of the most creative, innovative, interesting and exciting work done in this field is in works at the lower-end of production values.

For better and for worse, in the 1990s, artists' books have come of age. There are several dozen artists' presses in the United States, Europe, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand committed to artists' books as their major or sole mode of expression. [6] And there exist quite a number of artists for whom the complexity, density, and specificity of the book form are essential features of their artistic vision (Gary Richman, Susan Baker, Clifton Meador, Joan Lyons to name just a handful of representative American artists). The complete body of their works deserves critical recognition and attention. This is slow to come, but the need for an informed critical debate has begun to motivate the

artists' book community to produce a rigorous intellectual assessment of such production. There are various newsletters published in association with Centers for artists' books (*Ampersand* and *AbraCaDaBra*, produced in the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles, respectively). A few journals with broader artworld constituencies, such as *Art Monthly* in London, have regularly published the work of critic and historian of artists' books (notably Cathy Courtney). *On Paper*, formerly *Print Collector's Newsletter* frequently features artist's book reviews by Nancy Princenthal. And most recently, Brad Freeman launched the *Journal of Artists' Books* (1994 to the present) to foster critical debate in the field.

The downside of this infusion of critical energy is the end of the naive era of books as unmediated and spontaneous expressions. The anyone-can-do-it mood has been replaced with a new professionalism (and that earlier "anyone" has to be qualified—since when the "anyone" was a blue-chip artist the response to their work was very different than when the artist was an individual working in a garage somewhere).[7] The field of artists' books has expanded through programs in colleges and various local centers of activity fostering the production of works which are often unconscious hybrids of various traditions of fine art print protocol, limited edition portfolios, high end publishing, livre d'artistes, and self-publishing. There is formulaic and weak work among these productions, and also much precious, crafty stuff, but there's also solidly interesting work by artists finding their identity within the field—and in this regard, artists' books are now no different from any other artform. And, like any other viable art form, the artist's book continues to reincarnate itself through various mutations and transformations in response to the needs and visions of each generation and each practioner. The mistake would be to hold out some standard of judgment as universal or as carrying a morally superior position. Too often, the myth of the democratic multiple has been used in this way without looking the too evident paradoxes in the face.

In a recent conversation, Cathy Courtney recounted to me an anecdotal experience she had had reading the latest artist's book from the London-based BookWorks, *The Diary of a Steak*, while on a train. The book has a photographic image of a hunk of raw meat on its cover with a small sticker where the price tag would appear on a supermarket steak. But the tag says, "hear my erotic music." A man seated across the aisle from her seemed clearly perturbed by the image, and Courtney

said she was reminded once again of the power of an artist's book to function subversively in the most ordinary of surroundings simply by its transformation of the standard form and format. Or As Brad Freeman has said, "Over its lifetime, the book has the capacity to insinuate itself into unforseen locales." And it is in this insinuating capacity that the book continues to serve the original vision of the democratic multiple—as a work which one encounters with no introduction and no warning and which suddenly, oddly, uniquely transforms the viewer's expectations by its unexpected innovative originality. To privilege the democratic multiple at this point in time is a questionable enterprise freighted with the burden of another generation's notion of moral superiority and unrealistic expectations. The few artists who do persevere in that direction deserve respect and, in certain cases, serious critical appraisal. But many have also looked this project squarely in the face, made their effort or assessment, and seen fit to rethink its premises. In artists' books, as in any creative endeavor, there are no rules. Make the books you want to make, the books you believe in. Those are the only books worth producing. The failure of the democratic multiple is not a failure of production, but of reception—another of the many moments in which the efforts of alternative discourse have been eclipsed by the economically advantaged mainstream. Artists' books have failed to find a place as a democratic artform, at least up until now. But in the future —?

1."Lucy Lippard, The Artist's Book Goes Public," p.45; Joan Lyons. *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* Peregrine Press and Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY, 1985, p.45-48.
2. Ibid, p.45.
3. See my article "The Work of Mechanical Art in the Age of Electronic (Re)production," in *Offset: Artists' Books and Prints*, Brad Freeman, ed., exhibition catalogue, NYC, 1993. Included in *Figuring the Word*, p. 184-193.
4. See Susan Compton, *The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books 1912-1916*, British Museum Publications, exhibition catalogue, 1978; and my book, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Granary Books, New York, 1995.
5. There are a handful of other bookstores and dealers specializing in artists' books, but Printed Matter's symbolic identity and longevity define its particular role.
6. No doubt elsewhere as well, but if there is a significant output of artists' books in Africa, South America, or Asia, it has not managed to find much distribution or visibility.
7. Which only points out how "mythic" the idea of the democratic multiple was, and how linked to an artworld aesthetic styled as a political gesture: compare the careers and critical reception of the work of Joe Ruther and Ed Ruscha, of Telfer Stokes and Gilbert and George, of Gary Richman and Richard Prince. In each case, the first artist in the pair worked in the form of independently produced multiples with affordable price tags (under $30); each is a compellingly original artist; each languishes in relative obscurity by contrast to the art star counterpart whose "democratic" multiple productions are frequently underwritten by well-funded publishers, galleries, or institutions.

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