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The growth of artists books
exploration and clarification

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There is much evidence of the growth in the area of artists books and book arts in general in the last 10 -20 years. This evidence includes more artists books and fine-binding exhibits, more colleges and universities building book arts programs into their curriculum, more regional book arts centers opening across the country that teach and support practicing artists, numerous Web sites devoted to promoting and advocating book arts, and new books being written about the medium. Johanna Drucker summarizes this growth in the opening paragraph of *The Century of Artists' Books*:

Artists books have come of age in the 20th century. ... The enormous amount of activity in the realm of artists' books in recent decades builds on the outpouring of creative production which has developed in the 20th century.

With the growth of book arts and artists books in particular, an accepted fact, I would like to explore and clarify the reasons why people are drawn to this medium, why this expansion has and continues to take place and why it is likely to continue. In addition to statements from artists I interviewed, I will draw from other documentation to explain this phenomena.

As I listened and read, nine major issues surfaced that offer some explanation for the growth in book arts:

- role of digital technology
- women's interest
- tactile nature of the book
- increased opportunity for study
- many paths of entry into the medium
- the book as a familiar icon
- the book as an time-based interactive medium
- the book as power
- books are fun

The role of digital technology

Digital or computer technology plays an interesting and unique role in the growth of book arts. Oddly enough, computer technology is a double-edged sword. On the one hand computers make book arts more affordable and give artists more control and flexibility. On the other hand, artists seem to be reacting to the digitalization of the world around them and seek the friendly, tactile world of the book as an antidote to virtual reality.

All of the artists I interview used a computer. For some this use was more removed from their art and only used for writing, connecting with friends or conducting business through e-mail, or researching book questions on the Web. In these ways alone, the computer has made a significant contribution to the book arts community.

For others, computer technology had many uses. Artists that first learned the medium using only traditional typesetting and photography noted how the use of computer (most frequently a Macintosh), scanner and software has simplified procedures, given more control and enabled the creation of effects that were previously unattainable.

With the invention of polymer plates for letterpress printing, the ability to create type and design on the computer, output it to a negative to make a polymer plate has given letterpress printing new life. As many variations on the role of computers exist as there are artists. Some scan in hand-rendered art work, create typography and print on either laser or ink jet printers. Others create full illustrations in drawing and photo manipulation programs and print offset. Still other create digital drawings for high tech laser cutting equipment.

Significantly, there was unanimous agreement that the computer is only a tool and as Keith Smith succinctly stated,

[The computer] is just a tool to say something. If the artist does not have anything to say, or does not have the courage to speak, they rely on technology for pretty, but vacuous images.”

For some instructors, knowledge and use of the Internet for research

and publishing has become a part of the book arts curriculum. This brings in another interesting perspective: the computer is re-establishing the idea of the democratic multiple by giving more artists access to publishing and new audiences. As the computer becomes a household item, more people who may not otherwise seek out a gallery can view art online.

Another opportunity the computer has made available is that libraries with ancient books that are far too fragile to be handled by admirers and researchers can be scanned and available for viewing online.¹ With millions of these valued volumes being destroyed yearly by mildew, insects, human handling and acidic conditions, this is one way that enables these works to be preserved for future generations (or at least until the technology they are recorded on becomes obsolete).

Peter Verheyen also presents a caution that the availability of computers, software and desktop printers can make it easy to produce a book, but they cannot teach design and sound structure.

Even though some people come to book arts for a more hands-on experience, they are not Luddites or anti-technology and may use the computer for various aspects of the creation of a book. They find, however, that the many processes involved in creating a book provide them with opportunity for working with their hands and is something tangible in an increasingly virtual reality. This tactile experience is discussed in more detail in a following section.

Richard Minsky, founder of Center for Book Arts in New York, reminds us that even if a book artist does not use the computer, they are still at the “frontier of new technology. ... Modern adhesives, inks and papers developed from research in conservation laboratories in the last 20 years have radically altered the chemical composition of materials available to today's artists.”²

The role of women

How women are related to the growth of book arts is not a topic I had planned for in my thesis statement. However as I began to question various artists on their views about the growth of the medium, it became apparent this was an issue I should address. It has certainly stimulated some very interesting conversations and insights. These may have raised more questions than answers, but out of them I believe there is strong evidence that one of the reasons book arts has grown in the last decades is because of the number of women that have begun to work in the medium.

In my interviews most of these conversations were prefaced with “these are generalizations, and I know many wonderful men that work in the book medium, but...” And the “buts,” usually brought on the phrase “most of the students in my classes are women” or “a majority of the entrants in such and such an exhibit are women.”

Judith Hoffberg, a widely respected curator and critic, has been involved with book arts since 1965. Her perspective is that 35 years ago women made up at least 90% of book artists, but beginning in the late 70s and through the 80s, more men became involved perhaps raising their numbers to the 20% range.

“I found many more men – in fact I curated a men’s diary show in Wisconsin to counteract a women’s journal show. I found enough men throughout North American who had been doing journals, travel diaries and even printed editions.”

She suggests this number 80:20 ratio is still fairly accurate, but that it is “NOT” a women only medium and the “greats” names of Timothy Ely, Keith Smith, Scott McCarney, Tom Phillips, Dieter Roth, Jan Voss and I could go on and on, continues to expand the definition of books. Yet the next echelon is basically women.”

Some of the reasons raised as to the profusion of women involved in book arts, are based on generalization and stereotyping for which there are many exceptions, but also which do have some validity. The most frequently mentioned of these are that women are drawn to create

book works because it is a narrative art form the likes of which had not previously existed. Women are comfortable with this form because socialization has made them more familiar with language and story telling.

Another common reply was that women tend to create in a smaller more intimate size, more typical in book art, whereas males are drawn to larger and more forceful objects.

In *Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?* Silvia Bovenschen³ suggests the feminine aesthetic is “answered in terms of a preoccupation with the detail or with pattern or decoration.”⁴ In this article she quotes Lucy Lippard in a paragraph that supports the validity of there being a stereotypical women’s aesthetic.

And yet, there can be no doubt that the realm of female experience is sociologically and biologically different from that of the male...This differentiation exists, and yet for every case that I can specify there are innumerable others that defy such specifications.⁵

Several artists I interviewed mentioned that while their classes were mainly filled with women, they knew many teachers that were men. One artist suggested this could be like males who are stereotypically reluctant to ask for directions; men may prefer to learn the material on their own rather than take classes. Another suggestion was that perhaps women fill up their spare time with taking classes, whereas men have other pursuits.

This latter suggestion of women learning book arts in their spare time, pulls in the idea of the book as a craft object. Susan King suggests that many women are drawn to the book from the same impetus that draws women to quilts: you can pick them up and put them down, and create them in stages in your home with a minimum of tools. Like quilts, books can also be a modest or useful object and incorporate the family photos or a daily journal. While many women will continue to pursue to book as a craft object it still raises their awareness and support of those who choose to seek further study and develop as a book artist.

Kathy Walkup, with her long academic involvement in a woman’s college, has done considerable thinking about women in book arts. She

suggests there are also some socio-political factors at play. She believes, and Susan King also echoes this statement, that women's interest in book art began with the rise of the contemporary women's movement in the 1970s. As women began to explore more job opportunities, they discovered they could perform, and even enjoy jobs that required brain power, physical exertion and working with machinery. Many women during this time took the opportunity to get involved in printing. With the women's movement the printing trades also offered the opportunity to gain a voice both politically and in literature as women began publishing broadsides, poetry, journals etc. As women became involved in fine press printing and branching into other areas of book arts, they became mentors to others and the numbers of women began to increase.

Walkup also mentioned another sociological perspective, that women many tend to move into careers that are being abandoned by men and are considered passé or no longer lucrative by men. So as traditional letterpress printing technology was dying, women began to move in and form careers in the medium. Other professions she used as examples where this has happened are teaching, library work, and most recently it is occurring in government.

Tactile nature of the book

The tactile nature of the book, both in its creation and in its reading is an important factor in most book works. In this digital era our daily lives have become disengaged from touch. Creating or reading an artists' book brings alive the sense of touch, the tooth of a paper, the softness of fine leather, the creasing of a page, the texture of an emboss. For an artist there is a concrete sense of satisfaction felt in transforming sheets of paper or other media into a book.

For the person viewing the art, or reading the book, they seem to like work that they can touch. As was noted in the interview with Gwen Diehn, a review of one of her exhibits focused on the enjoyment of handling the art.

Increase opportunity for study

When learning the various skills involved in creating a book meant study in Europe, few people had or took the opportunity to learn. However in the last 20-30 years many book arts centers have opened across the country; The Center for the Book (New York), The Minnesota Center for Book Arts (Minneapolis), Iowa Center for the Book (Iowa City), San Francisco Center for the Book (San Francisco), Columbia College Chicago Center for Book and Paper Arts, Pyramid Atlanta (Washington, D.C.) to name a few. Colleges and universities are developing courses, often in conjunction with these centers, and individuals are setting up studios that are partially supported by teaching small classes. “The more people learn, the more people teach and the more people learn.”

The Internet also provides an opportunity for learning as pages of instruction are posted online and questions can be quickly answered by members on list serves willing to share their knowledge.

More opportunities are also available to see book works in a galleries, libraries and museums and so learning from and being inspired by other’s work also adds to the momentum.

Many paths of entry into the medium

The variation in background of the artists interviewed is just a small sampling of the many paths artists take to be come book makers. In addition to the many artists that switch from a different medium to books, there area also a great many artists who became interested in book works through their careers in library science, conservation, photography and so forth.

The fascination thing about the medium is that it can take on a life of its own but can still incorporate elements of previous careers and artistic endeavors. To quote Neil Turtell,

I think this may be one of the things that appeals to the artist – that you have more flexibility and more scope for imagination in producing an

artists' book that you might have in another medium.(Shireen Holman, Artists' Books in the National Gallery: An interview with executive librarian Neal Turtell, In Print Online: www.norsecode.com/mdpm/archive/00mar/frontpg.htm)

To illustrate this one can look at Emily Martin who as a painter, realized the narrative qualities in her work were very suited to book works, or Kathy Walkup who moved from literature to fine press printing and artists books.

Many people when asked why they choose artists' books, stated that rather the medium chose them, To quote Richard Minsky, "Somehow it has a way of taking over your life (and perhaps the lives of those around you) :>)" Perhaps this is also why there are many statements like, "I collect books because I love them, not because they are a good investment" or "I am a book artist because I love the medium, not because I can get into shows and can sell work."

Time ... the 4th dimension

Another insight to the expansion of book arts could be because of what Gwen Diehn calls the "4th dimension." With most mediums you are exposed to the work all at once, with a book the artist has more control over the time dimension. Ultimately though, it is the reader and the interaction with the book that has ultimate control in the length of time spent viewing the work and the pathway taken through the book. In this way each reader has a different experience.

Books are one of the few art forms that require a length of time to view in entirety. Because of this, concepts have time to develop and one can walk away with a deeper or richer encounter than when viewing a two or three dimensional work.

The book as power

From its inception the book has been associated with power. For hundreds of years only the wealthy could afford a book or the education required to read it. A potent example of the power of the printed word

is the Reformation. With the development of moveable type and the printing press, common people gained access to the Bible. They began to interpret the Scriptures in their own way and the whole balance of power was upset.

Susan King discussed her upbringing in a religious household and how that influenced her view of the book. She suggests that anyone growing up in a religious home will transfer some of the associations with a Bible to other books. There are also other examples in many cultures of the power of the press. The press is associated with political change, when a dictatorship comes into power, one of the first things they control is the press. As mentioned early this is also one of the attractions that lead women to book arts in the 1970s.

There is also a power in the book because it is such a familiar icon. Since childhood we have all been fascinated, transformed, entertained and educated by books. For the artist to create something unique out of this form that brings people to a new understanding of the book is a powerful experience and as a reader to have this encounter is also a powerful experience. Both the artist and the reader are transformed by creating and reading an artists book.

Books are fun

In conclusion, one can't overlook the simple, but wise statement made by Peter Verheyen: "Books are fun." As important as computer technology, the special appeal of books to women, the tactile nature of the book and all the other reasons why book art is on the rise, one should not forget this.

1(Adobe Magazine, Summer 1999)

2Richard Minsky, Book Arts in the U.S.A. Catalogue
introduction for exhibit

3 Silvia Bovenschen, Is there a feminine Aesthetic?
Ecker (1985) pp 23-24)

4 Stephen Bury, page 22

5 Silvia Bovenschen, Is there a feminine Aesthetic?
Ecker (1985) pp 23-24)