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Artists books in the future opportunities and challenges

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Having reviewed the history of book arts, and established the current state of the medium, we can begin to look toward and plan for the future. According to art historian and curator Cornelia Lauf, artists books have grown up and and left behind the ambiguity and contradiction of youth.¹ I believe that it is still in the young adult stage: full of ingenuity and excitement and with a few major life decisions ahead.

Book arts and artists books have matured in recent years due to the confluence of two key trends; education and technology. These trends will continue to have an impact on the future of the medium.

Education

In the last decade an infrastructure for book arts education has become firmly rooted in this country. With facilities close at hand and teachers that are experts in their fields, knowledge of the medium can be passed on to future generations. As noted in an earlier interview, not all places and people have such an open and giving attitude. This seems to be one great characteristic of book arts in the U.S.

At this time many not-for-profit book art centers and colleges and universities are working collaboratively to create an innovative environment for learning. Examples of this would include Columbia College Chicago Center for the Book, and University of Iowa and Iowa Center for the Book.

As programs are being built in higher education, libraries are challenged to provide learning resources for students by beginning to collect and display artists books.

A Council of Book Arts Programs has formed that holds conferences every other year. This group hopes to deal with issues such as establishing a significant national voice for book arts education and its history,

developing critical and theoretical frameworks for education, setting curriculum standards, and improving support between “parent” programs and “youthful” programs. As seems to be the norm for book artists, members at this past conference held in February 1999, were called to act “selfless,” and to get involved at the grassroots in order to continue to promote book arts. They were called to edit a newsletter, organize exhibits or hold a conference.²

Teachers of book arts are also adapting the way they teach, moving away from just teaching about new structures to addressing concept and content. This will help to ensure that the next generation of artists will continue to bring maturity to the medium.

Concerns that will need to be addressed in the future include making sure the time-honored, solid techniques of the conservationists are taught to ensure that art work exists in the future and retains its value. If high quality is not maintained in the execution and structure of the book-as-art-form it will begin to unravel the anticipation and excitement that accompanies it at present.

As museum, gallery, and library collections grow, knowledge of how to catalog and display this unique art medium is being shared, but more work needs to be done to overcome preconceptions caused by the familiarity of the common book. Somehow exhibits will also need to address the issue of the audience.

One of the problems we face is that the book art audience is the most sophisticated of any art medium. It requires textual and visual literacy. It is tactile, time-dimensional and interactive. It’s not something you generally color-coordinate with a couch. It’s private rather than ostentatious.³

Perhaps there needs to be an educational component that accompanies exhibits in order to help the audience understand and appreciate the work at a higher level. At present artists’ books are a very affordable medium and for the price of one major painting you could purchase a collection which includes work by all the major book artists.⁴

Another issue that must be resolved is that we need a way to exhibit books that allows them to be touched and at the same time preserve them. These two contradictory needs pose a critical challenge. Having a book that is meant to be interactive enclosed in a glass box, statically fixed in one position destroys the innate attraction to the medium. It is like displaying a painting, veiled to protect it from the light.

A challenge has been voiced by many of the prominent first-generation book artists is that someone needs to begin a documentation of the history of contemporary book arts. Several of these charter members have died in recent years and it is important to document their contributions for future generations.

Several artists and writers have also expressed how digital technology is propelling book arts into the future. While this technology does serve to simplify many processes and has recreated an appreciation for tactile objects, it has also given us a new form for utilitarian information. We no longer need the book to carry this information and so the book has become freer to move in creative new directions.

The shift in communication media away from hard copy to electronic media has freed the book from pragmatic constraints, such as bearing literary or educational messages, leaving the form as a vessel for artistic experimentation.⁵

During this time of digital mania when the death of the book is being widely proclaimed the executioner may be its savior. We cannot look into the future to see the forms that this new vessel will take, but we do know that the medium has a solid foundation and many creative individuals waiting to explore its course.

New Invention⁶

Some brilliant brains have now come up with the ultimate Built-in Orderly Organized Knowledge device called a BOOK. The BOOK is a revolutionary breakthrough in technology: no wires, no electric circuits, no batteries, nothing to be connected or switched on. Compact and portable, it can be used anywhere – yet it is powerful enough to hold as much information as a CD-ROM. Each BOOK is constructed of sequentially numbered sheets of recyclable paper, each capable of holding thousands of bits of information. These pages are locked together with a custom-fit device called a binding which keeps the sheets in their correct sequence. Opaque Paper Technology (OPT) allows manufacturers to use both sides of the sheet, doubling the information density and cutting costs in half. The BOOK never crashes and never needs rebooting. An optional BOOKmark accessory allows you to open the BOOK at the exact place you left it in a previous session, even if the BOOK has been closed. BOOKmarks fit universal design standards and can be used by various manufacturers. You can make personal notes next to BOOK entries with an optional programming tool, the Portable Erasable Nib Cryptic Intercommunication Language Stylus (PENCILS)

Portable, durable and affordable, the BOOK is being hailed as the knowledge device of the future and thousands of contented users have committed to the platform.

Notes

1 (New Art Examiner, Nov 1998 page 24-25)

2 (Journal of Artists books 13)

³(Richard Minsky, personal correspondence)

4(richard Minsky personal correspondence 07/03/00)

5 (New art examiner p 26)

6. This is a humorous e-mail that was circulating the internet in the summer of 2000. I felt it quite fitting as an ending to my thesis.