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Senior Thesis  
Research Paper # 2  
October 21, 2001

## The Artists Book as a Political Statement

The book in its simplest definition, is a container to hold textual and/or visual information. This might not sound like a revolutionary thing, but in this paper I propose that it has been and can be again. I will discuss the historical context of the traditional book and will talk about how modern artists books are part of this tradition to raise awareness, educate, and affect change in a political and social context.

The book has been seen as a dangerous thing in some societies. For those trying to control the masses, restricting access to books and even burning books, were seen as necessary to maintaining power. The thirst for knowledge is not easily slaked however and if we look at history we see a pattern emerge.

Humanity has always strived to develop ways to record all types of information, from creation myths to food inventories. Most started as visual languages like the cave paintings of Lascaux (16,000 - 14,000 BCE) where we still wonder what the depictions of the animals stood for, where they religious in nature or maybe a way to teach the young how to hunt?<sup>1</sup> We will probably never know.

In Sumeria, the earliest known civilization beginning around 3000 BCE, the development of a writing system was created to keep track of all the day-to day activity of a government, religious order, and tradespeople. They started out with pictographs, simple visual representations of actual objects, to communicate with. It eventually evolved to a more abstract form called cuneiform. Cuneiform encompassed about 600 characters that could virtually express anything in their spoken language. These abstract characters eventually led to a phonetic language, where the characters represent the sounds of the spoken languages. The Egyptians quickly followed and their hieroglyphics developed along a similar route.<sup>2</sup>

Being able to record ideas and pass them down from generation to generation allowed societies to build upon the past and make leaps in all aspects of knowledge. But this knowledge could also easily be destroyed. This was truer in the past when books were still hand-written and as such extremely rare. When a society fell due to inner or outer strife, often their records would be lost with only fragments remaining. One examples of this could be seen with the destruction of the continental libraries that was followed by the Dark Ages. There were 28 libraries at the time of Constantine but by the fourth or fifth century the few remaining collections were in the hands of the few literate nobles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen J. Hsylop, et al. *The Age of God-Kings : Time Frame 3000 – 1500 BC* (Alexandria, VA : Time - Life Books, 1987) p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York : Anchor Books at Doubleday, 1995) p. 182.

From early on in civilization we also see how access was restricted to reading and writing. In many societies, including Sumeria and Egypt, literacy was relegated to the priests and the government officials.<sup>4</sup> From this time on, we see that only certain classes were allowed the education to read and write. These classes were usually religious, governmental, or nobility/wealthy. It almost goes without saying that it was usually only males that had access to this education. This didn't change radically until the invention of the printing press.

The first evidence of a printing press was around 868 in China where we see the use of wood-block printing. Although this allowed the lower classes access to new information, it did not have the same affect as the printing press in Europe. With over 20,000 different characters in the Chinese language the development of a moving type system wasn't feasible and thus it was still prohibitively expensive to produce in mass quantities. It was also felt that the imprint of the artist was important and discouraged the use of wood-block illustration as a medium in it's own right.<sup>5</sup> The invention of the moving type press in Europe in the mid-fifteenth century was a bit more revolutionary. This invention made it much cheaper to print multiple copies and shattered the monopoly on information that the Church and the nobility controlled.<sup>6</sup>

Concurrent with the printing press in Europe we see radical new ideas being presented and debated such as feminism, religious reformation, and democracy. While not the main reason for these movements, the printing press was an important tool. One example of this is the translation of the bible from Latin and it's widespread distribution as one reason that Martin Luther was able to gain converts to Protestantism.<sup>7</sup> The power of interpreting the bible shifted from the almighty Catholic Church and it's priests to the literate individual. With the rise in the literacy rate and the wider spread dissemination of information we see the masses participating more in the shaping of society.



Fig. 1. William Blake, *The First Book of Urizen*, 1794.

Artists books have taken up that tradition today. Artists books are generally thought of developing in their own right around 1945.<sup>8</sup> In order to determine how artists books differ from the traditional book it's useful to look at William Blake (1757 – 1827) who is considered by many a precursor to the modern book artist. Blake created a mythical world that conveyed modern (and slightly ahead of his time) themes of oppression, revolutionary politics, and a critique of religion. Blake wrote and illustrated all of his books of poetry. His technique was unusual in that he combined the idea of the multiple and the hand-made. The books were printed by relief etching yet they were often numbered and hand-tinted. His illustrations were not merely decorative ornament but often interacted with the text, occasionally creating a contradiction (figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Honour, p.51.

<sup>5</sup> Honour, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> Honour, p. 398.

<sup>7</sup> John M. Headley, "The Continental Reformation : A Religious Interpretation, " in World Civilizations : Sources, Images, and Interpretations, ed. Dennis Sherman, et al. (New York : McGraw Hill, 1994) p.46.

<sup>8</sup> Johanna Drucker. The Century of Artists' Books. (New York City : Granary Books, 1995) p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Lukacher, "Visionary History Painting : Blake and his Contemporaries," in Nineteenth Century Art : A Critical History, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman. (London : Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1994) p. 99.

Blake's books differed greatly from other illustrated books of the time, the *livre d'artiste*. The *livre d'artiste* were first seen on the market around the 1890's. Popular artists and poets work was featured in these editions which were meant to appeal to the new upper middle class. They were often lavish productions with beautiful paper, exquisite bindings, and expensive printing. While being about artists and showing their work they are generally not considered artists books. For example, the artists themselves often had little or no hand in the creation of the book. The text and visuals are done in traditional format, each on an opposite page facing each other. The book form itself was not integrated into artwork or vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

Here would be the part where I would share the definition for a modern artists book. Unfortunately I've yet to find one. Instead I found a lot of debate and confusion. The term artists book was first credited to Diane Perry Vanderlip who curated the show by the same name in 1973.<sup>11</sup> She listed her reasoning for selecting the books in the show as "if the artist conceived his work as a book, I...generally accepted his position." Lucy Lippard has said that artists books are defined more by what they are not than what they are; i.e. photobooks, graphic novels, or fiction.<sup>12</sup>

Clive Phillpots, one time librarian to the Museum of Modern Art, has been changing definitions for years. The diagram he created below is his best definition to date.<sup>13</sup> He places the labels listed below within one another starting from top to bottom and a vertical line dissecting the circles to differentiate between multiples and one of a kinds.

Art

Book Arts –art which uses the book form

Artists' Books– book of which an artist is the author

Bookworks– artwork dependent on the structure of the book.

They are some patterns that do emerge from all this confusion. Most artists books regard the form of the book as integral to the whole book. Being conscious of the form and then exploiting it is a trademark of artists book. A non-traditional take on text, visuals, materials, and sequence are also important.

The most important to remember, though, is that the only way to truly define is by the artist's intentions. Keith Smith has remarked that "definitions are not ageless laws but current understanding."<sup>14</sup> Artists books, like life, are constantly evolving.

To gain a better understanding of how this works lets take a look at some examples of artists books that are political/social in nature and the artists methods.

<sup>10</sup> Drucker, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Kilma. *Artists Books : A critical survey of the literature*. (New York City : Granary Books, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Lippard. "Conspicuous Consumption : New Artists' Books" in *Artist's Books : a critical anthology and sourcebook*. Ed. Joan Lyons. (Rochester : Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1987), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Kilma, p. 27-32.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Smith. *Structure of the Visual Book*. (Rochester : keith a smith BOOKS, 1992), p. 23.

Text can be more than merely a vehicle for thought. It can be used to reinforce and contradict meaning, create the pace for the sequence, and be a visual element all on its own. These can be done through the font choice and size, including different choices on one page can create a hierarchy or emphasis. The kerning and leading can isolate or constrict. The placement of text on pages allows visual flow and creates pauses in the narrative.

Suzanne Lacy's book, Rape Is, uses repetition to raise awareness about what constitutes rape.<sup>15</sup> With the words rape is on each left page and different descriptions of those situations on the right shatter the old myths. Service, a Trilogy on Colonization by Martha Rosler uses mostly text to convey the stories of domestic workers. The format of the book and the three narratives that it holds are done in a postcard format. All of these stories create a personal account of exploitative working conditions.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes text placed out of the confines of the original book is the whole point. The 336 lines currently expurgated from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet in ninth grade textbooks, by Janet Zwieg, is exactly what the title states. The directions in the books ask the reader to copy the lines and place them in the textbooks in the correct spots in the play. They are then asked to pass the book on to another student. Zwieg creates a succinct and subversive book on censorship.<sup>17</sup>

The relation of text to visuals is another difference in artists books. Most illustrated books have a parallel relationship between the visuals and text. They share the same meaning or interpretation. This can weaken the power of both and make it redundant. Artists books mostly use modification where the visual and text can interact and relate. This leaves the options open for multiple meanings and strengthens the effect.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 2 Barbara Krueger No Progress in Pleasure 1987

One of the pioneers in this area is Barbara Krueger. Her style stems from her earlier jobs at Harper Bazaar and Mademoiselle where she rose to senior designer quickly. All her work shares the use of non-descript photos that look as if appropriated from an ad, cropped, with the text layered over (figure 2). The tension between the ambiguous text and photo creates multiple meanings that take on feminist, anti-consumerism undertones.<sup>19</sup>

The Myth of Justice, by John T. Pusateri, revolves around the shooting death of Amadou Diallo. Pusateri uses 19 red bullets to show the number of times Diallo was shot with the 22 other shots fired at him in black. To show this tragedy in context of the larger picture of police

<sup>15</sup> Drucker, p. 302.

<sup>16</sup> Drucker, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Structure, p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Smith. Text in the Book Format. (Rochester : keith a smith BOOKS, 1995), p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Heller and Karen Pomery. Design Literacy : Understanding Graphic Design. (New York : Allworth Press, 1997), p. 22-23.

brutality, under each red bullet appears the name of another unarmed minority killed.<sup>20</sup> The colors, visuals, and text all contribute for an emotional impact.

Materials outside the normal range of paper are used in artists books. Just about every and any material has found it's way into the book, from food to bodily fluids. Reading a book is a tactile experience; the reader holds it in their hands or on their lap. This sensory exposure can enhance the reader's experience. For example, a cold and clammy cover might send a shiver up your spine. Real objects can also create a focus point.

Tatana Keller's books B-11226 : Fifty Years of Silence and 71125 : Fifty Years of Silence both deal with her parents accounts of surviving the Holocaust (figure 3). She saw the numbers burned on her parents arms but they wouldn't tell her what had happened to them for many years. The narrative is made all the more compelling by the life-size arm of each of her parents cast in paper as a constant presence. Each page is cut around the arm so it is never out of sight.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 3. Tatana Keller. B-1126 : Fifty Years of Silence, 1992.

Materials include the ink on the paper as well and Ken Campbell uses ink to create an atmosphere. His Ten Years of Uzbekistan is taken from a commemorative album that Alexander Rodchenko created in 1934. As people went "missing" Rodchenko defaced their picture in the album. Campbell runs these pages over and over again in his press leaving the page heavy and dense with ink. It functions as a metaphor for the obliteration of these lives, leaving only a ghostly presence.<sup>22</sup>

Book artists are acutely aware of the book form and manipulate it further to unify the overall message. The shape, how the pages unfold, and the binding all play a part. Standard Body Measurements by Stacey Kirby uses her own body measurements (i.e. distance around her thighs) to determine the length of the accordion books (figure 4). These four books unfold a series of cutouts of the artists body. Each page is a unique mix of pattern paper, photo collograph prints, and transfers. She used this format to highlight the differences in individuals body shapes and how we are all connected in fighting against a "perfect" body standard.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 4. Stacy Kirby, Standard Body Measurements, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> John T. Pusater. The Myth of Justice. Central New York Book Arts : 2000. [web.syr.edu/~pdverhey/cnybookarts/pusateri.htm](http://web.syr.edu/~pdverhey/cnybookarts/pusateri.htm)

<sup>21</sup> Judith A. Hoffberg. Women of the Book : Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes. (Friends of the Libraries : Florida Atlantic University Library, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Drucker, p. 190.

<sup>23</sup> Stacey Kirby. Standard Body Measurements. (Central New York Book Arts : 2000) [web.syr.edu/~pdverhey/cnybookarts/kirby.htm](http://web.syr.edu/~pdverhey/cnybookarts/kirby.htm)

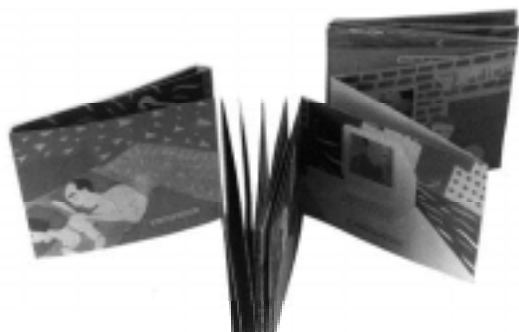


Fig. 5, Karen Chance. *Parallax*, 1987.

Karen Chance's *Parallax* uses the form to highlight two points of view. The narrative is of a straight and gay man's lives as they intersect on the daily subway ride. Each side of the book shows their independent lives with occasional die-cuts that allows a peak into the other's life.<sup>24</sup> Scott McCarney's, *The Bible Belt*, takes an altogether different form. This piece was created in response to a religious cult who spanked a child for eight hours and eventually killed her. All because she refused to apologize for taking food from the dinner table

without asking. The book actually consists of a large leather belt that is laced with pieces of the Bible.<sup>25</sup> The book is not meant to be read in the normal sense.

"Since the artist aims at transforming life rather than producing art, artists books, just like objects, poems, and performances, provide auxiliary means to serve this project - vehicles, mediators, springboards allowing them to function as instruments of liberation."

- Robert Filliou's attitude as described by Moeglin-Delcroix.<sup>26</sup>

Artists books that are political and social in nature fit aptly in the category of art that transforms life. That, however, is a huge task and leads one to ask how? Artists books provide another avenue for information to the public. Stephen Kilma comments that artists books are a way to be outside the established museums and commercial art world.<sup>27</sup> This implies a way to get books that deal with subjects too controversial or not economically feasible to a larger audience. These subjects are usually out of the mainstream and aren't represented in the traditional book setting. It also looks for a way to get an audience that would not usually come through the traditional institutions to interact with art.

Lippard has pointed out that the artists book allows a reader much more intimate encounter with art.<sup>28</sup> Instead of gazing from a distance, afraid to touch lest the security guards yell at you, you can actually take this artwork with you. When you're done you can give it to your friends and they in turn pass it along. There is no time limit on these exhibitions.

There has been ongoing debate surrounding the idea of the multiple vs. limited edition in artists books. Limited or singular editions connote the artists book as a rare object. It usually raises the price, sometimes out of the range of the average person. These rare objects are more at home in the gallery than someone's bookshelf or left on the bus. Many critics, including Joanna Scott, Susan Larson, and Ferris Olin, feel that the artists book should be an inexpensive

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Structure*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Structure*, p. 196.

<sup>26</sup> Renee Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert. *The Cutting Edge of Reading : Artists' Books*. (New York City : Granary Books, 1999), p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> "The Artist's Book Goes Public" in *Artist's Books : a critical anthology and sourcebook*. Ed. Joan Lyons. (Rochester : Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1987), p. 47.

medium and in their opinion, a more democratic artform.<sup>29</sup> The multiple is when there are no signed editions or limit on production. It looks to make as many reproductions as warranted. With the economics of printing, the more you print, the cheaper it is. Lippard has hoped for artists books to be as common as magazines at the supermarket.<sup>30</sup> For a book to have the largest impact, as most political/social books want, it needs to have the widest audience.

Does having a book be inexpensive necessarily mean it's widely accessible? Not always, while economics is one barrier there are others. Most people outside of the art world have no clue what an artists book is. Artists books are generally bought and seen by collectors and other artists.<sup>31</sup> There are more opportunities to see and buy artists books but not nearly as common as the supermarket. Distribution problems have gotten better with the advent of organizations dedicated to the making and selling artists books but they have yet to get to the mass market stage.

Accessibility also means that the content is accessible to the viewer. There is no guarantee that the majority of people will pay attention to or even understand the artists book. This is a problem for any artform.

As stated before, many artists want to be outside the mainstream commercial artworld and see artists books as their avenue. Ulises Carrion was one of the first to add a differing view of trying to liberate the artists book from the commercial art world. He makes a good point that by working with book publishers artists are just exchanging one commercial venue for another. He saw little value in this exchange.<sup>32</sup> It is also necessary to point out that publishing houses are subject to the same economic pressure as any other business. Books that will garner the most profit are usually chosen over the more risky prospect. Most artists books have never succeeded in a commercial sense (one exception being the Griffen & Sabine series) and are usually published by the artists themselves or by smaller publishing houses.

It is a slippery slope in trying to extend artists books into a more mainstream, commercial arena. Unless you are independently wealthy, producing artists books in mass numbers means you are being published by a large publishing house. You are subject to their censorship and opinion. You might be able to reach a mass audience but what good is it if your message has been diluted to nothing? The flip side is that you can have a powerful book but no one besides your family and friends ever read it. Artists books still have a long way to go with finding their niche in the larger society.

The debate will go on, artists will still make books, and they will change those who read them. I am optimistic about the future for artists books even with all the promises and disappointments. One book, one painting, one idea does not change the entire world. They inspire small changes that may one-day lead to major change.

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<sup>29</sup> Kilma, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> "Consumption," p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Kilma, p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> Kilma, p. 59.

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