

Artists Books As Alternative Space

Martha Wilson, 1978

From the Artists Books Bookworks catalog for the 1978 exhibit organized by the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, the Experimental Art Foundation, the Institute of Modern Art, and in conjunction with Laica California and Franklin Furnace New York, and with the assistance of the Australian Gallery Directors Council

Artists all over the world are producing books and periodicals which, when scrutinized, are not "books" or "periodicals" in the conventional sense. Ed Ruscha's *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, for example, is not "about" parking lots, as its Library of Congress classification would suggest; it is an artwork which contains pseudo-formalist images of white lines on dark shapes. *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* was self-published by Ruscha in an edition of 2413 in 1967, and in a second edition of 2000 copies in 1974. If the current supply runs out, the artist will probably republish a few thousand more. Hence, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* is distinct from conventional books, and conventional artworks, which are produced in expensive, limited editions or as one-of-a-kind works. What function does an artwork which is cheap, portable and potentially unlimited serve? It functions, as so many artists are aware, as alternative space, a channel which circumvents the exclusivity of galleries and the critical community.

The antecedents of the current artists' book phenomenon may be found in the books and periodicals published by the Futurists and Surrealists after the turn of the century, with Dada-Constructivist typographical experimentation, and with Marcel Duchamp's publication of his notes in facsimilie. Marcel Duchamp's invention of an art object lacking uniqueness, the ready-made, inoculated the art world with the idea that multiples could be as valuable as originals if the idea rather than the material of the work was the locus of "art." Duchamp's attitude permitted him to produce his working notes in facsimilie for *Box*, published in 1914. Individual scraps of paper of assorted shapes and sizes with handwritten notes in ink and pencil written before 1915 were reproduced exactly for multiples of *Box*, and again for *Green Box*, which was published in 1934. Duchamp's conceptualism, which set the precedent for production of works in multiple, is still difficult for many people to accept, especially when the artwork costs \$3.50. To make matters worse for the layman, high-speed offset printing now allows artists to produce their works in multiples of thousands.

Additional antecedents to the present-day artists' book movement may be found. The Futurists, Constructivists, Dadaists and Surrealists advocated fusion of the arts, or at least relaxation of the boundaries separating literature, music, art, poetry, drama, dance, and even politics and sociology. This attitude on the part of artists working in the early 20th century made collaborative and experimental works such as artists' books and periodicals and performance works possible, and encouraged artists to utilize the public media. For example, "Le Futurisme" was proclaimed on the front page of *Le Figaro* by Emilio Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. Marinetti's use of a mass medium was as important as the Futurist Manifesto itself; he was attempting to broadcast aesthetic ideas into a larger world, to circumvent the limits of the artworld of his time through the use of a new form, the popular newspaper. Even before his proclamation appeared in *Le Figaro*, however, Marinetti was aware of the value of publication as alternative space; between 1905 and 1909 he published *Poesia*, a Futurist periodical which included previously unpublished poetry and prose by Europeans and Americans. The potential for artists' books and periodicals to reach a wider audience was recognized long before printing techniques caught up with artists' enthusiasm.

The book form, like the artist's periodical, was recognized by artists as a portable unit which could distribute ideas more efficiently, and which had its own particular set of aesthetic problems, although perhaps less than a dozen artists' books per year have come to notice from the years between 1920 and 1960. Out of the Bauhaus school came such books as El Lissitzky and Vladimir Mayakovsky's *For Reading Out Loud*, published in 1923. Experimental typography designed by Lissitzky indicates the intonation with which Mayakovsky's Russian and German text is to be read. Not only is the typography experimental; the design of the book itself, with its stepped index to the text organized on an invented visual system, is unusual for any time. Other isolated pockets of publishing activity existed in Europe and America before the great surge of artists' book publication in the 60s. Bern Porter, living in Houlton, Maine, published a work called *Map of Houlton High School* in 1928, in an edition of 250. This three-page, 11 x 14" work was printed with a letterpress from a zinc cut. Porter claims to have begun publishing bookworks in 1914, and he has published at least 47 to date. In 1948 he published *The Union of Science and Art*, an early conceptual bookwork, consisting of four 8% x 11" pages and one photograph. Certainly Bern Porter has been making bookworks steadily for longer than practically anyone else, but he has never gained notoriety or monetary reward; he presently lives in Belfast, Maine, in near-poverty, with stacks of books in his basement.

Offset technology was accidentally discovered by Ira Rubel in New Jersey in 1904, but not until after World War II did offset printing become a highly versatile medium, faster and more precise than any previous printing medium. A Swiss artist, Dieter Rot, began to experiment with offset printing on book pages, collaborating with his publisher, von Hansjorg Mayer. Together they designed books with slits cut through the pages, holes, shapes, printed with colors, comic-book images, drawings, notes, solving the technical problems of printing and die-cutting, binding and boxing. Between 1957 and 1972, Dieter Rot designed a series of twenty books, each volume challenging the book medium on every issue: sequentially, the page format, information-bearing associations, binding alternatives, etc. Dieter Rot continues to publish; presently he is collaborating with Hansjorg Mayer on a magazine called *Review for Everything*, published in Stuttgart. Among his remarkable productions is bok 3b and bok 3d, Volume 7 of his collected works, originally published in 1961 in Reykjavik, Iceland. The pages of this volume are newsprint, printed with comic-book strips both upside down and rightside up, and punched through with various-sized holes so that the page format is completely subverted. A second section of this same volume is white newsprint with black line drawings, also punched through with holes. Volume 8 of his complete works is composed of two variants of a portfolio made between 1958 and 1961. Book A is composed of black and white unbound sheets, offset and die-cut, so that perforated square grid centers may be recombined in any order and direction to produce an artwork with unlimited visual combinations. Book B is similarly offset in blue and red ink, and the center of each unbound sheet is die-cut in grid patterns so that they, too, may be recombined in unlimited visual patterns. Both volumes together may be combined in any order, of course, so that the possible variations are endless. Volume 12, called the *Copley Book*, was published by the Copley Foundation in Chicago in 1965. This book is composed of 40 sheets of different sizes, mostly printed on both sides, folded or collaged, offset and letter press. The limited-edition version of this book was wrapped in a photograph and signed by Dieter Rot. As this sampling suggests, Dieter Rot has rigorously investigated every aspect of the book format, and he continues to do so.

In the 60s, interest in alternative media suddenly became fierce, and several notable varieties of artists' publications appeared. Fluxus artists, intent upon producing events, often produced cheap, portable offset works as a residue of their activities. Robert Filliou's "Ample Food for Stupid Thought", for example, is an unbound "book" of postcards, each with a thought on one side and place for a stamp and address on the other, which incorporates the idea that someday the book will be dispersed

and valueless as an object. "The Great Bear Pamphlets", twenty in all, were published by Dick Higgins' Something Else Press from 1965 to 67, and remain associated with Fluxus. The most notorious pamphlet in this series is "Some Recent Happenings", by Allan Kaprow. Dick Higgins published experimental works by artists such as Dieter Rot, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Ray Johnson, George Brecht, Bern Porter, Daniel Spoerri, Geoff Hendricks, Robert Filliou, and Alison Knowles; he also republished experimental literature by Gertrude Stein, and works by writers such as Emmett Williams and Jackson MacLow. Many of the Something Else Press books look conventional, with sewn bindings and hardcovers, but further investigation shows how far from conventional books they are; for example, Dick Higgins' *foew&ombwhnw*, published in 1969, looks like the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, with nubby black cover, red-edged tissue pages, and a ribbon marker, and it is written in the two-column form in which the Book of Common Prayer appears. But *foew&ombwhnw* is entirely written by Dick Higgins to take advantage of the associations that can be made to religious practice, and it is a very funny work indeed.

During the 60s, Seth Siegelaub began publishing catalogs which themselves served as the artist's "show." As the art object dematerialized, the book became a handy, portable repository for ideas. Lawrence Weiner's *Statements*, for example, contains suggestions for artworks which may be executed or not, while the book containing the statements originally sold for \$1.95. Similarly, the catalog entitled *Doug Huebler* contained maps with lines drawn through cities, and other pieces; Huebler's work is documented in a catalog which never accompanied an installation. In Amsterdam at the same time that Seth Siegelaub was publishing in New York, the Art & Project group began publishing bulletins which were a cross between artists' books and periodicals. Each bulletin was devoted to a single artist, and within the limits of the 4 x 8V format, each artist could do as he or she chose. Over 100 Art & Project bulletins have been published since 1968, and distributed all over the world by mail. By publishing catalogs, books, and pamphlets, artists reached an international audience directly, and a furious exchange of art ideas began to occur in the 60s which has not abated.

The rise of artists' books as a prevalent means of distributing work came about in part due to artists' dissatisfaction with the gallery system. During the 60s, artists like Dan Graham regularly used magazines and newspapers as channels to circumvent the exclusivity of galleries that would not show his work. For example, *Homes for America* was published in *Arts* magazine in December, 1966, and *Schema* was published in *Aspen* in spring, 1967. Perhaps Dan Graham is an example of an artist whose work has gained acceptance in the United States through the back door of publication rather than exhibition. Ray Johnson, founder of the New York Correspondence School of Art, made the process of sending free papers through the mail the validation, or publication, of his work. Periodicals containing multiples by artists such as *SMS* and *Aspen* magazines began appearing in the 60s, containing ephemeral artworks which were lightweight enough to be sent out in the mail. One issue of *SMS* and *Aspen* magazines began appearing in the 60s, containing ephemeral artworks which were lightweight enough to be sent out in the mail. One issue of "SMS" magazine contained a burned bowtie multiple by Lil Picard which left librarians from coast to coast bewildered; was the issue in "good" condition upon receipt if it contained a burned item? How was a burned bowtie to be shelved and checked out? At the present time, libraries are still reluctant to collect and shelve artists' books because they come in an array of shapes, sizes, formats, and materials which are often difficult to label and store. Alternative spaces have sprung to collect, exhibit, and advocate artists' books however, and many libraries are convinced that they must add to their collections of artists' books to afford educational materials to arts students.

The book was recognized by artists as a portable unit which could disseminate art ideas efficiently, and a means by which to influence the general public. Many artists' records, books, cassette tapes and magazines are being packaged for distribution through commercial channels, and artists are familiarizing themselves with marketing techniques in hopes of selling their works to the potentially broad audience outside the artworld. This marks a healthy tendency towards decentralization in the arts which is likely to make an impact through colleges and secondary schools, and spread into American homes. My hope is that soon artists' books will be as commonplace as cereal boxes, read over and over again in a leisurely way in people's living rooms, or given as gifts instead of stationery and soap. In conclusion, artists' books and periodicals provide alternative space, exhibition outside the gallery system, which will alter the complexion of future art and the public's experience of art.