

On the opening of Booknesses: Artists' Books from the Jack Ginsberg Collection at UJ Art Gallery, Johannesburg

It all began with the book. The wonderful exhibition here is the culmination of more than 40 years of building a collection of artists' books, 100 years in the history of the artist's book, three years of meticulous planning and four months of selecting the artworks on display. It is also 21 years since the first exhibition of artists' books from Jack Ginsberg's collection was held in South Africa.

In 1913 Blaise Cendrars's and Sonia Delaunay-Terk's *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* imploded into the world. A riot of text and images, an energetic blast of ideas, words and colours hurtle across its pages in total synthesis. *La prose du Transsibérien* was - and still is - acknowledged as the first example of simultaneity, and of image and text having equal status - of responding to and feeding in and out of each other to create a unified whole as a work of art. This seminal artwork has since helped define what artists' books are and what they can potentially be. Co-curator Rosalind Cleaver describes *La prose du Transsibérien* as enduring and constantly inspiring.

Since 1913 artists' books have grown from and are part of this artwork's ongoing influence. From the 1920s to the 1950s the genre evolved with books produced by artists such as George Grosz, Stéphane Mallarmé, Max Ernst and Picasso - examples of which are on show here. Then came the 60s and 70s when the idea of the artist's book as a democratic multiple was firmly established by artists such as Ed Ruscha producing works that were sold cheaply or even given away. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) can both be found in this exhibition, displayed alongside books inspired by Ruscha's practice.

It was around this time in the early 70s that Jack Ginsberg began collecting contemporary artists' books. In the years since he has amassed a vast and important collection of artworks, enthused and encouraged artists, curators,

librarians and students in South Africa and internationally to engage with, enjoy and create artists' books. His Ampersand Foundation has enabled South African artists to explore the international artworld outside of the continent and to return to make new work inspired by the many experiences that travel offers. Their horizons expanded in much the same way as *La prose du Transsibérien* has opened its viewers' minds to ideas and experience of the wider world. Many examples of the artists' books produced by artists benefitting from the support of the Ampersand Foundation can be seen in the accompanying exhibition *Booknesses: South African Artists' Books* at the FADA Gallery.

Fast forward to 1994, New York, where Riva Castleman includes *La prose du Transsibérien* in the exhibition *A Century of Artists' Books* at the Museum of Modern Art (October 1994 – January 1995), a survey of 140 works by 100 artists exploring the book as art. *Transsibérien* also features on the cover of the comprehensive catalogue accompanying the show. In South Africa, Jack Ginsberg and curator David Paton's curiosities are piqued. How many books in the MoMA show could also be found in Ginsberg's collection they wonder? (43 it turns out), and what would they have selected if they had curated the show? And so the seeds were sown.

And here we are now, viewing the fruits of an extraordinary collaborative project between Ginsberg and Paton as we step into the UJ gallery brimming with over 250 examples of contemporary artists' books.

Using *Transsibérien* as the catalyst from which to respond and expand upon Castleman's selection, David Paton has unpacked the central themes of *Transsibérien* as a means of curating his selection of books from Ginsberg's collection. These themes form part of our daily existence, from love, the body, journeys, landscape, war, death, fear and love, colour and the senses.

The artworks presented here have been thematically grouped (and colour coded) to assist our navigation of this vast exhibition presented in custom-built cabinets to pack in as much as possible for the journey. Our route through the

show allows the soaking up of images and words in the books' pages in the same way we can travel through the visual experience of viewing the original copy of *Transsibérien* - the first artwork we encounter as we enter the gallery space.

And, as you traverse this exhibition space, you will travel around the world in the same manner. You'll rub shoulders with Picasso and Matisse in Paris. You'll meet Joseph Beuys and Veronika Schapers in Germany, from the Netherlands Annesas Appel; in the UK, Gilbert and George, David Hockney and Ian Hamilton-Finlay. In Belgium we meet Frans Masereel; Izet Sheshivari in Switzerland; Walasse Ting in China, Maurizio Nannucci in Italy, Stephen Spurrier in Australia and Antic Ham in Korea. From the USA you will see classic examples of artists' books by Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Barbara Kruger, Buzz Spector, Barbara Tetenbaum, Robbin Ami Silverberg and Inge Bruggeman. And then as we return back home from our grand tour we'll meet South African artists through books by William Kentridge, Kim Berman, Willem Boshoff and Stephan Erasmus. We will need more than one trip to meet all these books properly.

So please, as the curators intend – consider this exhibition as a provocation. It's a call to its visitors to be absorbed in these works of art and spend time with them as they propose to you a new chapter in the history of art in South Africa.

What we are witnessing here in this magnificent exhibition has come from one man's extraordinary commitment to, and love for the book – Jack Ginsberg, who has devoted his life to collecting, supporting and encouraging artists to work in this format. And from one book, *La prose du Transsibérien* – masterfully interpreted as a curatorial muse by David Paton assisted by Rosalind Cleaver. Their intellect, dedication and imagination offers us a once in a lifetime opportunity in this exhibition, through 100 years of history, on a journey we will never forget.

Sarah Bodman, March 2017