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## Artists' books as interpretive acts

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In Johanna Drucker's (1995:1) seminal book, *The century of artists' books*, she observes that:

A single definition of the ... term 'an artist's book' continues to be highly elusive in spite of its general currency and the proliferation of work which goes by this name. Its increased popularity can probably be attributed to the flexibility and variation of the book form, rather than to any single aesthetic or material factor. ... This [is a] zone ... made at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas – rather than at their limits.

Drucker (1995:9) goes on to unpack and analyse a number of book-works using this methodology, describing elements of *bookness* in terms such as 'intermedial'<sup>1</sup> and 'highly malleable' and unpacking her examples in terms of their 'formal conceptions' and 'metaphysical spaces'. Perhaps her (1995:9) most succinct description of the artist's book is, "... a form to interrogate, not merely a vehicle for reproduction". Elsewhere Drucker

(2003:[s.p.]) describes artists' books as, "... 'phenomenal' books, which mark the shift from books as artifacts, documents, vehicles for delivery of content, and instead demonstrate the living, dynamic nature of work as produced by interpretive acts". Implicit in these descriptions is the mutability of form, something that could, and indeed must, incorporate an expansive understanding of the tactile, haptic conventions of the codex. However, any acceptance of an expanding conception of the artist's book is not easily gained. Philip Smith (1996: [s.p.]) in an article revealingly titled *The whatness of bookness or what is a book?* states that *bookness* is being, "stretched to include forms which carry a digitalized or electronic text such as a CD, a hard disk or a microchip, or miscellaneous forms such as spirals of paper with continuous text, or pyramids, dodecahedrons and other geometric multiplanar forms". Notwithstanding this diversity within book production, Smith (1996:[s.p.]) draws a line of acceptance:

I would not describe all these things as having the quality of bookness or being strictly covered by the definition. A blank book is

still a book, but a blank dodecahedron or unmarked spiral of paper is not a book, it is a dodecahedron, etc. A text is a text and not a book, but any other object one likes to imagine may perhaps be its conveyance. A text can be inscribed on anything but this does not make it a book, or have the quality of bookness, even as a scroll retains its scrollness without any text on it. A teddy bear with text on it is not a book! ... The book is the hinged multi-planar vehicle or substrate on which texts, verbal, or tactile (the latter would include braille [*sic*] and other relief or embossed effects, found objects, pop-ups) maybe written, drawn, reproduced, printed or assembled.

Smith evinces an unwillingness to let go of a number of seemingly immutable and thus defining elements of the book: the tactile nature of the object, its hinged and thus codex form and its separation or independence from both text and image. This view does not take us any closer to understanding the artist's book, and is nothing more than the re-stating of the

conventions of the codex as signifiers of *bookness*, and consequently, by extension, anything else is ‘other’. Drucker (1995:1), on the other hand, would have us explode this dogmatic position; her survey of the field of artist’s book-making as a, “zone made at the space at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas” helps us make this shift. In Drucker’s terms then, an artist’s book might re-render the tension between a book and its limits through becoming ‘phenomenal’ through the agency of the artist’s ‘interpretive acts’.

One such interpretive act, I remember, was my early childhood encounter with a bear-shaped book. To me, something magical had happened in that semiotic space between a material shape and that which it signified, between the story about an animal and the animal itself. The book facilitated a marvellous transgression, a slippage, between the signifier and its signified. Smith’s observation notwithstanding, my teddy bear-shaped book was the most magical and transcendent text I had, up to that point, ever encountered.

Both Smith and Drucker (1995:9), however, warn that:

[n]ot every book made by an artist is an artist’s book, in spite of the old Duchampian adage that art is what an artist says it is. ... A mere compendium of images, a portfolio of prints, an incidental collection of images original or appropriated, is not always an artist’s book, though the terms on which the distinction may be sustained are often vague.

Artists’ books are not books *on* artists, artists’ monographs, sketchbooks or journals and an artist illustrating the texts of others produces something more in keeping with the tradition of the *livre d’artiste*<sup>II</sup> than the contemporary form of the artist’s book.

And what might this ‘contemporary form’ be? Drucker (1995:161) eloquently describes artists’ books as interrogating the very conventions of a book which, through constant exposure, neutralise or efface its identity. She states:

The familiarity of the basic conventions of the book tends to banalize them: the structures by which books present information, ideas, or diversions, become habitual so that they erase, rather than foreground, their identity. One can, in other words, forget about a book even in the course of reading it.

David Gunkel (2003:290-291) describes this effacement in another way; with regard to a physical book’s relationship with its subject matter or referent:

... the book is understood as a surrogate for something else from which it is originally derived and to which it ultimately refers. The printed signifier, therefore, is considered to be both secondary and provisional in relation to the primacy of its signified. And for this reason, the tension between the book’s material and its subject matter is rendered effectively immaterial.

Yet through exploiting tropes of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity – in

terms of the structural, literary, literal, narrative and material conventions of the page and book format – book artists explore technical and graphic conceits as the theoretical operation of “enunciation” (Drucker, 1995:161) through which attention is called to a book’s own processes and structure.

If artists are unengaged with the enunciation of a book’s *bookness* and if a reader/viewer does not gain some enhanced experience of *bookness* whilst negotiating its pages, chances are that the object made and experienced is merely a book made by an artist, not an artist’s book. In these terms then, artists should explore, extend, interrogate and generally exact criticality regarding what a book is as a structural/material object. *How* a book performs its operations and embodies those qualities of the ‘phenomenal’ book that Drucker (2003:[s.p.]) seeks, marks a shift from books as artefacts, documents and vehicles for delivery of content, to a demonstration of the living, dynamic nature of works as produced by the artist’s interpretive acts.

My personal experiences of a host of local and international examples of artists’ books have always been enhanced and nuanced by the degree to which an artist has engaged with the book as an interpretive act: interpreting or reinterpreting the *literary structural conventions* of the page,<sup>III</sup> and more critically, the *physical structural conventions* applicable to the entire object through interrogation of elements such as structure,<sup>IV</sup> shape<sup>V</sup> and material.<sup>VI</sup>

The most auratic of books seem to be those in which self-consciousness and or self-reflexivity are at play. Books,

conscious of and about their own bookness, and in which interrogation of their physical structural conventions helps to construct or underpin their content, are often those which parallel my formative, bear-shaped, experience of books as phenomenal objects.

In the exhibition *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* my contribution *Speaking in tongues: Speaking digitally/Digitally speaking* exploits physical structural conventions so as to problematise specific aspects of the book's reception. The small accordion-fold book is divided into two chapters. The first, *Speaking digitally*, comprises a series of my youngest son's subtly moving hands while gaming on-line. The second chapter, *Digitally speaking*, is a series of my mother's dynamically moving hands while conducting a conversation. The book is designed to facilitate multiple openings and multiple ways of negotiating the narrative: it can be viewed page by page or it can be opened in such a way as to allow both chapters to be paged through simultaneously. It is also possible to open the book in its entirety so that every page is immediately visible which, conventionally, is very unbook-like. The accordion-fold structure and its small size suggest that this is a flip book, echoing the animated hand sequences of the video which accompanies the book. By avoiding a spine, the hand images pass across the gutter without visual and structural interruption; however, this structure hinders the successful flipping of the pages which often 'jump' out of the reader/viewer's grasp. Being difficult to handle and refusing to keep a stable form, the book seems to have a mind of its own.

In the haptic self-reflexivity of manipulating a book of moving hands and the

self-consciousness of the book's structural possibilities and opening options, I have attempted to engage with Drucker's desire for a shift from a book as artefact, document or vehicle for delivery of content, towards a living, dynamic object resulting from interpretive acts.

### Conclusion

Not every book made by an artist is an artist's book. It is what the artist does with the structural, shape and material conventions of the book which begins to interrogate and transform them into agents of self-consciousness and/or self-reflexivity. In this article I have attempted to explore some critical thinking around these issues so as to explain, in the absence of an encompassing definition, what constitutes some of the characteristics of true artists' books. I have used Drucker's notion of 'interpretive acts' in order to explain how artists – including a brief discussion of my own work – attempt to transform and release books from their mundane and forgettable role as containers of information, unlocking their innate *bookness* and moving them towards becoming 'phenomenal' objects.

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### Endnotes

I. This term was originally coined by Dick Higgins in his book *foew&ombwhnw* (1969), *Something Else Press*. See Drucker 1995:9&18.f

II. The *Livre d'artiste* (literally *Book of the Artist or Artist's Book*) is usually considered to be a limited edition fine press book which rose to prominence towards the end of the 19th century. Commissioned by collectors and publishers such as Daniel Henri Kahnweiler, they brought together the talents of writers/poets and visual artists but in which the images tend to illustrate or illuminate the dominant text. These objects are sometimes termed *Livre d'peintre*.

III. Western codices have historically developed a conventional visual organisation to facilitate reading such as the standardisation of the structure of the book as whole as well as individual pages. In, for example, double page openings, features such as marginalia, headers, footers, gutters, footnotes, indices, titles and subtitles all facilitate reading from top left to bottom right and from first page to last and the organisation of text into columns and rows are termed literary structural conventions.

IV. Structure often refers to binding decisions. Unusual bindings include *dos-à-dos*, *Jacob's ladder* and *Möbius-strip* structures. Keith Smith (1994:229) states that there are four basic types of book constructions: *codex*, *fan*, *Venetian blind* and (oriental) *fold books*

V. Round books seem as rare as square books. The internationally renowned collector of artists' books, Jack Ginsberg, has found only a few examples

of round books. These include works such as David Stairs's *Boundless* (1983), Susan Allix's *Faces (18)* (1993) and The Arion Press's *The World is Round* (1986). An important local example of a square book is Belinda Blignaut's *Antibody* (1993). Philippa Hobbs's 176418 *Possible Synoptic Mirages* (1981) is triangular. The pages have been cut through at about three quarters from the bottom of the spine creating a small triangular set of pages at the top and a larger quadrilateral set below. The title derives from the number of permutations of images which can be made by opening different sections of the book.

VI. In his introductory essay for the catalogue of the exhibition *Artists' Books* in the Ginsberg Collection (1996), Ginsberg refers to the long O.E.D. definition of the term 'book' in which its materiality is discussed:

3. gen. A written or printed treatise or series of treatises, occupying several sheets of paper or other substance fastened together so as to compose a material whole. In this wide sense, referring to all ages and countries, a book comprehends a treatise written on any material (skin, parchment, papyrus, paper, cotton, silk, palm leaves, bark, tablets of wood, ivory, slate, metal, etc.), put together in any portable form e.g. that of a long roll, or of separate leaves, hinged, strung, stitched or pasted together.

Ginsberg draws attention to the fact that this entry was written by James A. H. Murray in the last quarter of the 19th century. Murray's definition has, for over one hundred years, suggested many alternatives to the conventional paper support, ironically providing contemporary book artists with a way of interrogating the very thing Murray was defining.