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’ 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* 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 interpretative act: interpreting or reinterpreting the *literary structural conventions* of the page, and more critically, the *physical structural conventions* applicable to the entire object through interrogation of elements such as structure, shape and material.

The most auratic of books seem to be those in which self-consciousness and self-reflexivity are at play. Books,
conscious of and about their own book-
ness, 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 phe-
omenal 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
problematises 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, Digita-
tally speaking, is a series of my mother’s dy-
amically 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 manipu-
lating 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, docu-
ment 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
foewombwhnw (1969), Something Else Press. See Drucker
1995:96-18 &.

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 pub-
lishe, such as Daniel Henri Kohnweiler, 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 or-
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 margins, 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 Môbius-strip structures. Keith Smith
(1994:229) states that there are four basic types of book constructions:
codes, 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.