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When a book is not a book

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A few months ago the land artist Strijdom van der Merwe invited me to co-produce an artist's book for *Transgressions and boundaries of the page*.

I was flattered and flummoxed. An “artist's book”? A cursory introduction to this fascinating medium at the Tate Britain a few years ago hardly equipped me to participate in the creation of such a “book”, so emboldened by this task I set forth on my journey of discovery.

From the project website (www.bookboek.co.za) I learned that, “Artists' books function outside the constraints of the publishing industry and tend to be based on individual artistic vision, conceptualisation and execution. It is therefore the ideal medium to involve artists from diverse disciplines through playful exploration and discovery of the possibilities and boundaries of the book.”

The project culminated in three exhibitions. As part of the Afrikaans Woordfees, an annual festival of the Afrikaans written word, the artists' books were first exhibited in the Africana Reading Room of the Gericke Library at the University of Stellenbosch in March 2010.

The reading room, I must explain, is a windowless, vault-like repository of some exquisitely rare and valuable Africana books and documents. It might be the energetic residue of decades of concentrated study or the low ceilings, synthetic light and ambient drone of air conditioning and humidifiers, but the entire space and atmosphere invite concentration and focus.

Having participated, I spent quite a lot of time at the exhibition, finding the perfect excuse to observe the visitors with uninhibited abandon. It was only during the last half hour of the last day that I realised what made me come back time and time again to look at the people looking at the books. All seem to have entered into a private conversation with each and every one of the exhibits – touching, reading, paging, listening, engaging.

They seemed hypnotised, spellbound, mesmerised. ‘Mesmerise’: to hypnotise, to enthrall – after F Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a flamboyant and, shall we say, slightly eccentric physician whose controversial methods of healing got him barred from medical practice in

both Vienna and Paris. In stark contrast to the ideals of rationality and scientific inquiry that informed intellectual pursuit in the late 18th century, he chose to dress in flowing lilac robes and to wave wands. He would enter a dimly lit room in which soft music played and touch the afflicted part of a patient with his hands or one of his wands. The patients were reported to experience a sort of seizure, upon which they would feel completely cured. It was pure theatre – mesmerising.

To his followers he was an inspired healer, but to the medical fraternity he was a charlatan. After intense investigation they pronounced him an impostor and claimed that his cures were based purely on “imagination”. They concluded that the profound changes in behaviour so evident in those who were seeking his help were nothing but a “function of suggestion”. Indeed, a function of suggestion.

Ironically, Mesmer, whose work is considered by some to be the precursor to hypnotism and auto-suggestion, died in obscurity.

But back to the artist's book. The genre is notoriously difficult to define, and

so in order to understand what it is, we sometimes have to rely on the function of suggestion. Artists' books are not books, they are works of art that commonly follow either the form or the function of what we traditionally think of as a book. Sometimes neither form nor function is present, yet it still "feels" like a book. So, it might look like a book but not be one, or it might not look like a book but would, in fact, be a book.

Artists have been making books for centuries. Up to the invention of the printing press around the middle of the 15th century, almost all books produced in the West were one-of-a-kind and handmade. And though those two characteristics are often an integral part of an artist's book, these antiquarian books fall outside the parameters of this genre.

Historians have identified various 18th- and 19th-century artistic contributions that could be called artist's books, yet the fact remains: books as art objects are essentially a 20th-century concept – an artistic expression of the prevailing intellectual *Zeitgeist*, particularly the notions of deconstruction, as proposed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Dieter Roth (1930–1998), one of the fathers of the artist's book, cut holes in a book so that more than one page could be seen at a single moment, thereby challenging our understanding of what a book really is by deconstructing the form, rendering it functionless.

Another early proponent of this art form is Ed Ruscha (1937–). Ruscha photographed the 26 petrol stations he passed on Route 66 (the road between his home in Los Angeles and his parents' home in

Oklahoma) and self-published the first edition of *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (400 copies). These were for sale only at the petrol stations featured in the book, an idea that challenged all existing distribution structures.

Which brings us to another set of characteristics of the artist's book: self-publishing, self-distribution and multiples. An artist's book, if one could venture a succinct definition, would thus be an object of art that explores ideas and concepts using the form and function of a book and that is unique or in limited editions and is distributed in unconventional ways.

But, it's not necessarily book-like or sculptural or even distributable. Like one of the exhibits at *Transgressions and boundaries of the page*: calling her installation *As die Gode by ons kom eet* (*When the Gods come to dine*), Roela Hattingh set a table for 12 guests using 26 hand-made ceramic plates decorated with words. Each plate represents a page from a book. In order to read the story, visitors have to move from one chair to the next (assuming the role of that particular guest for a moment). There's a story, but no book! As I said, this is a notoriously slippery genre to define.

Safest to say that artist's books are works of art. And as such, they are hugely collectible.

An interesting phenomenon is the fact that artist's books are often collected by institutions. One of the biggest collections belongs to the Tate Britain (www.tate.org.uk). Other institutional collectors include libraries and centres for the book.

In South Africa, the most renowned collection belongs to Jack M Ginsberg. A 1996 exhibition co-curated by Ginsberg and University of Johannesburg academic, David Paton, resulted in a seminal book (the normal sort) on the subject of South African artists' books. The catalogue has become a collector's item in its own right (www.theartistsbook.org.za).

I recently had an opportunity to read some of the comments from visitors to the exhibition of *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* at the University of Stellenbosch Library: "Even better the 2nd time around; each book is a new world" (one of many comments singing praise).

"What prompted this extraordinary response from the visitors?" I asked Franci Greyling. "I think it had something to do with the context in which we showed the collection," she suggested. After the initial exhibition (held at the Africana Reading Room library), the show travelled to two other venues – both conventional art galleries.

"It was in the first setting (the library), a most unlikely place for an art exhibition to start with, that people engaged so naturally and physically with the objects. When we got to the second space (The Gallery at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus), we started noticing a change. Visitors had to be prompted and encouraged to engage on a physical level." The "books" were displayed on tables along uncluttered walls.

At the last venue, the FADA Gallery at the University of Johannesburg, all works of art were placed on plinths, conforming to the set notions of the art gallery tradition.

“It was curious to notice that the objectification of the pieces had a dramatic effect of inverse correlation with viewer participation.”

Platitudes like “the medium is the message” sometimes become so commonplace that they lose meaning. Yet, here we have it again. One show, three contexts, three experiences – all directly corresponding to the function of suggestion. The places suggested the response. We all know that in libraries you are at liberty to touch things and that art galleries are “hands off” spaces. It’s just seldom as apparent as in this case.

Poor Mesmer. To think he died in obscurity.

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