

Artist's Book Yearbook
2014-2015

Artist's Book Yearbook 2014-2015

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Contents		<i>Reading the Literary Text as 'Art in Space'</i> <i>Barbara Tetenbaum's "My Antonia"</i>	
Les Coleman <i>Tanya Peixoto</i>	4	Nathalia King	95
Introduction <i>Sarah Bodman</i>	5	<i>The Typographic Dante</i> Barrie Tullett	101
<i>Against Orthodoxy: A ramble in the woods of art</i> John Bently	7	Artist's Page <i>Stephen Spurrier</i>	108
Artist's Page <i>Elizabeth Willow</i>	13	Artist's Page Contributors	109
<i>Field Study International: Celebrating 20 years in the Field</i> Sue Hartigan	15	Artist's Book Publishers & Presses	111
<i>Bob Brown's Reading Machine & the Imagined Escape from the Page</i> Abigail Thomas	23	Bookshops for artists' books	115
<i>Making it happen with Angie Butler</i> Linda Newington	29	Artist's Book Dealers	120
Artist's Page <i>Sara Elgerot</i>	36	Artist's Book Galleries & Centres	121
<i>Stimulus/response – scratching away at some intrinsic and extrinsic problems in theorising the artist's book from the far end of a 'not-so-dark continent'</i> David Paton	37	Collections, Libraries & Archives	133
<i>Women's Studio Workshop: feminist history and birth of an era</i> Anna Giordano	45	Artist's Page <i>Stevie Ronnie</i>	148
<i>Book Art Object 2: making a book about books</i> David Jury	49	Artist's Book Fairs and Events	149
<i>The fourth Codex International Book Fair and Symposium</i> David Jury	53	Book Arts Courses and Workshops	153
<i>A history of Café Royal</i> Craig Atkinson	57	Design, Print & Bind	159
<i>Art as collaboration: 50 years of Edition Hansjörg Mayer</i> An interview with Eleanor Vonne Brown and Gustavo Grandal Montero	65	Print Studios	163
Student report: <i>When is a new 'BookArtObject' not an Artist's Book?</i> Pete Kennedy	77	Artist's Pages <i>Michael Weller</i>	167-168
<i>A New World: Johannes Häfner's Digital Picture Books</i> Reinhard Grüner	89	Journals and Magazines	169
		New Reference Publications	173
		Artist's Page <i>Elisabeth Tonnard</i>	178
		Organisations, People, Projects and Societies	179
		Artist's Page <i>Philippa Wood</i>	186
		Artists' Books Listings	187
		Artist's Page <i>Sylvia Waltering</i>	295
		End page <i>Paul Laidler</i>	296

Stimulus/response – scratching away at some intrinsic and extrinsic problems in theorising the artist's book from the far end of a 'not-so-dark continent'

David Paton

This piece of writing was originally developed as a contextualising introduction to, but later dropped from, a recent article in which I applied the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* to the task of proposing a tentative theoretical foundation for the artist's book.¹ It seems appropriate to share here as, if nothing else, it shows that there is life in the theoretical body of the artist's book-maker on the southern tip of the African continent. My research for that article took me in two directions: Firstly to Bakhtin's *Discourse in the novel* as well as Michael Holquist's *Introduction*, both published in the *The dialogic imagination: four essays* (1981) and secondly, to the 22nd edition of the *Journal of artists' books* (2007) which helped me establish some sort of lineage of a call for a more rigorous theoretical underpinning of the artist's book.

Bakhtin's ideas intrigue me on many levels, not least of which is his comprehensive unpacking of the novel as a form, and in his writings I often find myself able to substitute the words 'artist's book' for 'novel' and find a seductive correlation between the two forms. When Bakhtin, in Holquist's introduction (1981:xxix) draws our attention to "... the difficulty in defining the novel as a genre and the reason the question of its history is so fraught" I take notice and continue to find correlations in further descriptions of the novel form such as: "The novel by contrast seeks to shape its form to languages; it has a completely different relationship to languages from other genres since it constantly experiments with new shapes in order to display the variety and immediacy of speech diversity" (Holquist, 1981:xxix). Further provocative and potentially correlative descriptions of the genre occur: "... a consciously structured hybrid" (1981:xxix), "fundamentally anticanonical" (1981:xxx), always insisting on a "... dialogue between what a given system will admit ... and those texts which are otherwise excluded from such a definition" (1981:xxx) as well as that the novel "... has as its skeleton yet another model for a history of discourse ... supreme self-consciousness" (1981:xxxiii).

These, amongst many other potentially potent correlations between the novel and the artist's book helped me forge a three-fold argument in my article: Firstly, Holquist (2002:72) states that "Bakhtin is

particularly drawn to the novel, the genre least secure (*or most self-conscious*) about its own status as a genre" (my italics). Secondly, he (2002:72) draws attention to "...the novel's peculiar ability to open a window in discourse from which the extraordinary variety of social languages can be perceived". Thirdly, in relation to Bakhtin's two major protagonists and foci of study, Rabelais and Dostoevsky, Holquist (2002:72-73) states: "Rabelais and Dostoevsky are significant for Bakhtin not merely because they write novels, but because they advance the work of novelness, and it is novelness – not the novel, nor Rabelais, not even Dostoevsky – that is the name of his real hero". From this I was able to isolate three critical elements of Bakhtin's thought, in my article, which might underpin the artist's book's act of theoretical enunciation: self-consciousness, discursive perceptivity and [self]-reflexivity (or bookness).

However, what concerns me here is my second direction of enquiry which plots a trajectory of various calls for a more rigorous theoretical underpinning of the artist's book, and to which South African book artists and theorists seem to have responded. The 22nd edition of the *Journal of artists' books* (2007) was devoted to the proceedings of the *Action/interaction: Book/arts conference (A/I)*, held in June 2007² at Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts, Chicago. Conference co-ordinator Elisabeth Long, (2007:4-6) stated that, among their many aims "... we wanted a conference that focused on the ideas that underlie book artists' work, not the techniques. ... We had also wanted the conference to raise the level of critical discourse within the field ... to support more rigorous critique and analysis".

Conference speaker Matthew Brown (2007:6-9) provided a fascinating view of the problems the field of artists' books encounter when confronting, what the conference termed, 'theory' both within the aims of the conference itself (the field's intrinsic problems) as well as within its own international discourse (the field's extrinsic problems). These problems are of interest to me in this article and I begin, not surprisingly, with the conference's intrinsic problems in establishing, what Brown (2007:6) titled, *Book arts and the desire for theory*. He (2007:7) attempted to establish some nodes of criticality, "and explicit rhetoric", gleaned from the presentations and writings of luminaries in the field (whether they spoke at the conference or not) in order to satiate his "desire". Brown (2007:7-8) believed:

1. that each of Johanna Drucker's chapters in her seminal book *The century of artists' books* (2007)

“supplies individual propositions about kinds of book art, concepts that serve theoretically”,

2. that Richard Minsky’s conceptual categories by which to assess book arts can most usefully be deployed. These being
 - a. “object” (the materials and craft used to create the bookwork),
 - b. “image” (the presentation and appearance of the bookwork), and
 - c. “metaphor” (Minsky’s rather personal and contrarily defined term for the set of associations created by the combination of object and image),
3. that Buzz Spector’s “erotic associations of the book” and a book’s “fetishism” are concepts where “[t]he unique book object – and arguably books generally – find their meanings” (Brown, 2007:7),
4. that the *Tango Book Arts* collective’s³ identification of the elements of “time”, “structure”, “interactivity” and “visual language” as principles of “bookishness” were important as these elements, the collective argued, operate (in all or part) in selected examples of artists’ books ranging from Marcel Broodthaers to William Kentridge (Murken et al, 2007:22-24).

The fact that these principles of bookishness are also applicable to contemporary art making, especially when digital technologies are included in that making, resulted in the collective (Murken et al, 2007:24) ending their contribution at the conference with a series of questions. These questions unfortunately negated any certainty in the appropriateness and applicability of the four elements, especially when they move “out of the book arts field” (Murken et al, 2007:24) and into the world of contemporary art making – a concern shared by Marshall Weber (in Brown, 2007:8). This questioning by the collective and in the eliciting of the audience’s opinions, resulted in a ‘turning inward’ towards the contributions of the conference delegates, most of whom were artists. This met the organisers’ aim; what Long, (2007:4) describes as

... something that seemed less commonly available, the opportunity to explore with fellow artists the essence of the activity itself, the thoughts and attitudes that go into making ourselves artists ... we knew we wanted to engage the audience in this exploration, wanted to hear as many points of view as possible.

However, the inclusion of the experiences and ideas of artists inevitably took the discourse away from theory and pointed it, predictably, back towards practice. Brown (2007:8) wrestled with this contradiction, believing that a strong response against bland relativism (i.e. that which is, against that which is not, an artist’s book) would be that

“the book arts bring with them potentialities specific to the book format, and their virtue is their distinction from other media”. Realising that this position did not adequately address the theoretical underpinnings of the book arts, he (2007:8) continued:

Again, for me, this distinction is in the book’s bequeathing to us a literally graspable form and in its bequeathing to us a form anchored in semantic and syntactic meaning. The tactile and the verbal coordinate with the visual, the sculptural, and the temporal to make the book expressive as a medium.

Yet Brown could not escape the lure of practice when he (2007:8) summed up the conference’s major discussions (many emanating from the points already mentioned above) as “practice and theory are co-emergent. That’s it. That’s the point” which echoed Mary Tasillo’s (2007:12) argument that “... powerfully different critical insights come from those with creative expertise and those with a creative ignorance, if you will. Criticism suffers when either perspective is missing”.

But this did not seem quite enough, as Jonathan Lill’s (2007:18) opening statement at the conference, on the perplexing physical nature of artists’ books, acknowledged:

I tried to give voice to my dissatisfactions with artists’ books, a sense I have that artists’ books have not achieved the same expansiveness of expression seen in other modes of artistic production. I fear that artists’ books may have in-built limitations and that their marginalization in our culture may not be due to extrinsic factors as much as intrinsic ones.

These intrinsic limitations are “scale” and “intimacy” which “... prevent them from commanding attention and imposing themselves on our attention” as well as limitations in a reliance on letterpress and offset printing, where a “... greater focus on unique books [could] provide a more immediate aesthetic experience more akin to that of painting and sculpture” (Lill, 2007:18).⁴ And thus, the conference struggled to find a space of theory for artists’ books betwixt and between this ‘kinship’ and their “distinction from other media” and where “practice and theory are co-emergent” (Brown, 2007:8). A close reading of the conference proceedings and reports-back in the *Journal of artists’ books* (2007) exposes a cautiously optimistic resignation that comes with not having quite achieved one’s goals, or, more critically, having had one’s focus shifted.

Long (2007:6), revealingly states:

Having the amazing array of examples of book art that were available in the exhibit, coupled with a concentration of artists expressing their own ideas about what it is they do is certainly a first step in building the infrastructure within the field to support more rigorous critique and analysis and for that alone I consider the conference a success.

This conference differentiated itself from the other two in terms of its focus upon more rigorous theoretical underpinnings for the artist's book.

"Did we achieve our goals?" Long (2007:6) continues "Only in part, though I believe that the conference provided seeds for the type of ongoing discussion that we were searching for". It must have been disappointing to acknowledge that, after all its inclusive deliberations, the *A/I* conference constituted, by 2007, only a 'first step', only 'seeds'.

The purpose behind my analysis of *A/I*'s outcomes is partly based upon Brown's (2007:7) observation that "[t]here is an immanent and explicit rhetoric of the book present ... in the book arts community, not least in the continually stimulating thought of Drucker – most recently in *The Bonefolder* debate of 2005". Drucker's article, titled *Critical issues / exemplary works*⁵ had, in many ways, provided an impetus and direction for the *A/I* conference (and was referred to directly by Phoebe Esmon and Amanda D'Amico (2007:19) in their session which focussed on the online presence of the artist's book). Drucker's (2005:3) rebuke of, and challenge to, the broad book arts community to develop a discreet theoretical voice (the explicit problem) is plain:

Because the field of artists' books suffers from being under-theorized, under-historicized, under-studied and under-discussed, it isn't taken very seriously. In the realms of fine art or literature elaborate mechanisms exist for sorting and filtering work. But the community in which artists' books are made, bought, sold, collected, hasn't evolved these structures. Our critical apparatus is about as sophisticated as that which exists for needlework, decoupage, and other "crafts".

Drucker (2005:3) continues:

I'd even go so far as to say that the conceptual foundation for such operations doesn't yet exist, not really. We don't have a canon of artists, we don't have a critical terminology for book arts aesthetics with a historical perspective, and we don't have a good, specific, descriptive vocabulary

on which to form our assessment of book works. These three things are needed, even though each has its own problems and will raise hackles and objections.

The hackles and objections experienced at the *A/I* conference two years later bare testimony to Drucker's shrewd knowledge of the limitations of both the field and its participants. If there is a clear implication here, it is Drucker's (2005:3) exasperation in feeling that she 'might have to do it all' when she states:

The canon will emerge, and I don't mind helping lay the groundwork. But it won't emerge just because things are made and collected. It will come into being by critical consensus and debate. By writing *The Century of Artists' Books* I did some of that work. More remains to be done. ... This call for a community to participate in creating a critical language for artists [sic] books from a historical/aesthetic perspective and from a descriptive approach to books-as-such is part of my own impulse to force myself to make explicit many of the criteria implicit in the way I think about books.

When Long (2007:6) stated "[w]e had also wanted the conference to raise the level of critical discourse within the field, though I'm not sure we knew exactly what we thought that would look like", it was clear that Drucker's challenge was going to be difficult to meet and that, at this particular conference, the participation of artists would necessarily point the desire for theory back towards practice, a familiar territory from which Drucker has perhaps hoped to push away. Drucker's challenge, of course, responded to a much earlier call for critical theoretical work to be done. As far back as 1985, Dick Higgins (in Lyons, 1985:12) in his preface to the first comprehensive text on the artist's book, asks pertinent questions regarding the field's relationship with a theoretical discourse (the field's explicit problem) and who is responsible for this work when he states:

Perhaps the hardest thing to do in connection with the artist's book is to find the right language for discussing it. Most of our criticism in art is based on the concept of a work with separable meanings, content, and style – "this is what it says" and "here is how it says what it says." But the language of normative criticism is not geared towards the discussion of an experience, which is the main focus of most artists' books. Perhaps this is why there is so little good criticism of the genre. ... "What am I experiencing when I turn these pages?" That is what the critic of the

artist's book must ask, and for most critics it is an uncomfortable question. This is a problem that must be addressed.

With Higgins' pertinent words feeding, through Drucker to the *A/I* conference aims, Long's 'first step' and 'seeds' indexes the theoretical distance travelled since 1985 and the urgency of the task and length of the road ahead in establishing an appropriate theoretical underpinning for the field.

A year after the publication of *A/I*'s conference proceedings and reports Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden⁶ took up the challenge. Between March 2008 and February 2010 they explored the question of what will constitute the contexts of *artists' publishing* in the future, given a field that now includes both digital and traditional artists' books. From 2008, seminars, discussion groups, forums, practical and written projects and commissions, interviews and workshops were held in order to open critical debate with an international community of artists, educators, researchers, students, presses, publishers, librarians, curators, dealers, collectors and others involved in the field. As a result Bodman's and Sowden's *A manifesto for the book* (2010) - derived from the research project, titled *What will be the canon for the artist's book in the 21st century* (2008-2010) - proves to be perhaps the most comprehensive positioning statement regarding contemporary international book arts practice and which successfully acknowledges digital technologies, with both their advantages and disadvantages, as central to the field and its discourses.

Notwithstanding the importance of the research and the printed publication – not least of all for its global reach and the giving of voice to artists from eastern Europe and the global south – the broad sweep of the project, its self-conscious open-endedness and its asking of questions within inclusive and diverse contexts succeeds, like *A/I*, to place the theoretical underpinning of the artist's book firmly within practice.⁸ How the most recent major book arts conferences, the *College book art association conference* (San Francisco, January 2012), titled *Time, sequence & technology: Book art in the 21st century*⁹ and the *Codex international book arts fair 2013* (Richmond, CA) have extended the research completed by the UK artist/academics in order to move beyond the 'first steps' and 'seeds' of the *A/I* conference, remains to be seen. It is revealing that neither conference has published formal conference proceedings and I have found it almost impossible to extract readable papers and articles from the

former conference's participants, despite some of the abstracts promising to take our debate on the extrinsic problem of artists' books further. What seems clear, is a need for an articulate voice which, perhaps for the first time, points clearly towards theory from within the given of practice.

It is instructive that two recent pieces of academic writing in South Africa have, albeit in brief terms, focussed some attention on a theoretical underpinning of artists' books. Firstly, Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen (2009:65-73) forges an argument for the artist's book to be examined from a postmodern perspective. Barkhuizen is well aware of the issues emanating from the *A/I* conference, referring to a number of the participants' contributions. But, although the artist's book rose to prominence in the 1960s in response to postmodern pressures (amongst other concerns; authorial vs. receiver voices; changing views on aesthetic hierarchies; the circumvention of gallery, publishing and conventional art-economic powerbases as well as the rise to prominence of a new set of inter-medial writings) it might seem self-evident that the genre has been historically and critically positioned as a postmodern phenomenon,¹⁰ albeit with a substantial precursive history. Despite Barkhuizen's (2009:69) claim that "Drucker's discussion of artists' books reflects, whether intentionally or not, and without using the word, an essentially postmodern perspective", Drucker (2007:8) in fact states that

[i]t would be hard to find an art movement in the 20th century which does not have some component of the artist's book attached to it. ... A path could be traced which would include Expressionism, Surrealism in Western and Eastern Europe ... and Postmodernism to the present mainstream artworld concern with multiculturalism and identity politics.

Yet, despite this, Barkhuizen (2009:70) goes on to suggest that

[t]he elusive theoretical foundation for artists' books is therefore possibly due to the proposed definitions of artists' books as being grounded in concepts of the work of art as autonomous, subscribing to modernist paradigms and viewing the artist's book not as operating in the field of cultural production but as marginalised to the modernist mainstream.

Barkhuizen (2009:71) argues that in "... an 'expanded' field of cultural production" the book functions "as an electronic file; as conceptual art; as photography" and, as a result, can lose "its identity,

escape the narrow conventional definition of 'book' to become something else, such as video, digital book, engineering, architecture, performance. The book in itself can be considered to be the arena where the postmodern occurs and is acted out." The danger, however, of reading the artist's book into 'an expanded field' (as Bodman and Sowden have found) is that it runs the risk of losing its essential bookness, becoming, merely, a video, a piece of engineering or architecture or a performance.

The second piece of writing is Keith Dietrich's (2011) inaugural address at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. In his address, he (2011:14) argues that the artist's book inhabits an "ambiguous space between artwork and book" and within "... this undefined space where boundaries dissolve, the bookwork transcends the threshold from one space to another." Dietrich (2011:14) evokes Victor Turner's (1967:97) concept of liminality and the liminal space as a state "betwixt and between" all the recognised fixed points of structural classification in space-time. For Dietrich (2011:14) it is clear that when examining liminality one is, in effect, dealing with the *unstructured*, a condition allied to what Turner (1967:98) terms "the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless". Thus liminality can be read as an intersection where ideas and concepts are in constant states of confrontation and intercession: a rich theoretical space for describing the artist's book. Dietrich (2011:14) then joins the space between these states of confrontation and intercession and cultural hybridity by evoking Homi Bhabha's (1994:5) idea of liminality as an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications". For Dietrich (2011:15) the notion of liminality "is important in describing some of the phenomena regarding artists' books ... namely their transdisciplinary, transcultural and hybrid nature".

With particular import for a theoretical underpinning of artists' books, and which certainly deserves further exploration, Dietrich (2011:15) calls for a post-colonial as well as poststructuralist reading of the field:

This liminal state unlocks a hybrid space, or what Bhabha refers to as a "Third Space of enunciation". ... Positioned betwixt and between the world of books and the conventional world of art, the artist's book does not quite belong to either of these worlds and, despite this lack of stability, this liminal space allows for a freedom of movement and the dynamic exchanges of ideas, concepts and methods of working.

What is of particular interest to me in this reference to Bhabha's (1994:86) notion of the "third space" as interstitial, liminal, unfixed, in flux, dissolved and thus undefined, is the term *enunciation*. This term, which evinces articulation, certainly focuses the theoretical discourse upon justification, evidence and proof and reminds one of Drucker's (2007:161) reference to artists' books in which technical and graphic conceits are exploited in order to call attention to the conventions by which, through constant exposure, a book normally neutralises its identity. Drucker (2007:161) describes this as a book's *theoretical operation of enunciation*¹¹ by which attention is called to its own processes and structure.

Neither Barkhuizen nor Dietrich, however, unpacks the postmodern or the liminal, interstitial third space, for which they argue. Neither deploys an analytical methodology to demonstrate how the artist's book operates as a multi-authored postmodern form or as an object of liminality and it is probable that this was not their intention. But as a result of my deliberations on Bakhtin and the novel, written up in the article elsewhere, I have attempted to build on the impetus provided by these two pieces of research. In my article, my exploration of specific examples of artists' books¹² and particularly their relationships and dialogues which each other, is focussed through a lens provided by Bakhtin's writings on *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*. These critical terms, which demonstrate the dialogic, multivocal and heteroglot voices between works in history and within themselves as cultural utterances, are shown to be appropriate and useful frames for the analysis of particular qualities which enunciate artists' books presence in the world, and which I argue are: self-consciousness, discursive perceptivity and reflexivity. I apply Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and heteroglossia to the task of proposing a tentative theoretical foundation for the artist's book, as a dynamic visual language, which is relational and engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world (Besley & Peters 2011:95). What this research has also suggested is that further investigation of Bakhtin's ideas and particularly his writings on the *carnavalesque* (in which transgressive forms are given public and visible voice) might also prove to be an appropriate critical frame for theorising the artist's book.

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Notes

1. *Literator*, November 2012 33(1).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v33i1.353>
2. Brad Freeman notes that *A/I* was one of three well-attended and significant conference/fairs within an 8 month period in 2006/7, proving that the field of artists' books is vital and growing. The *A/I* conference was structured to encourage as much participation and reflection as possible. The people in the audience became an active voice rather than the passive recipient of information from the 'experts', distinguishing it from the two other conferences - the *Pyramid Atlantic book arts fair & conference* which took place in Silver Spring, Maryland in November 2006 and the inaugural *Codex international book fair*, February 2007 in Berkeley, California.
3. The collective consists of artist-educators, Katie Murken, Lindsey Mears and Katie Baldwin, originally all from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.
4. An idea already established by Drucker but which also includes a marketing aspect as books tend to sell in a different, generally lower price bracket than paintings or sculpture.
5. This was originally presented at the *Pyramid Atlantic book arts fair & conference*, November 2004.
6. Both are from the Centre for Fine Print Research, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK.
7. Bodman's and Sowden's concept of a canon is not the same as Drucker's, who understands the term to imply a body of recognised and acknowledged master practitioners and their masterworks. B & S's term is more open-ended, comprising recognition and acknowledgement of practice and what Higgins terms 'discussion of experiences'.
8. Elsewhere I have discussed, what I consider to be two critical aspects of Bodman's and Sowden's research project: that the use of digital technologies potentially liberates book artists from questions of similarity or fidelity to a sequential, physical or originary experience of the codex, and secondly, the notion of 'future proofing' digital data.
9. As a major figure and theoretician in the contemporary fine art and book art fields, Buzz Spector has been invited to give the keynote address with the banquet speech being given by Dr. Brewster Kahle, a computer engineer, internet entrepreneur, activist, and digital librarian.
10. Of importance here is the inclusion of Drucker's artist's book *The Word Made Flesh* (1989) on the seminal exhibition *Postmodernism: Style and subversion, 1970 – 1990* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, September 2011 – January 2012). It is included as typical of both artists' books and the reworking of the relationship between publishing, typography and visual art in what Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt term the "pre-digital" age. Further, Renée Riese Hubert's and Judd D. Hubert's *The Cutting edge of reading: Artists' books* (1999) is, specifically written from within a postmodern perspective of the field.
11. Acts of speaking, representing or making a work rather than allowing a work to be spoken for.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé's and Marcel Broodthaers' *Un coup de dés* publications, Buzz Spector's reductive *Marcel Broodthaers*, Ulises Carrión's *For fans and scholars alike* and Helen Douglas' and Telfer Stokes' *Real fiction* provided the foci for the article. *Towards a theoretical underpinning of the book arts: Applying Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia to selected examples of the artist's book*. David Paton. *Literator*; Vol 33, No 1 (2012)

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