

**Experiencing Artists' Books:  
Haptics and Intimate Discovery in the Work of  
Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Cheryl Penn**

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**2013**

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I, Phillipa Haskins, hereby declare that:

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As the candidates supervisor I have approved this dissertation for examination

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**Abstract:**

**Keywords:**

Artists' books

Book arts

Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen

Cheryl Penn

Haptics

Hermeneutics

This dissertation centres on the classification of artists' books based on the qualities they possess as works of art as well as the intimate engagement required by the reader in order to experience such works in their entirety.

Among the qualities investigated are intimacy through the use of novelty devices, haptics, text, narrative and concrete systems, space, and shape. These qualities are exemplified through works by Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Cheryl Penn.

## **Acknowledgements:**

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Faye Spencer for her patient dedication and support, endless advice, and constructive criticism. I could not have hoped for a better supervisor. Faye has been a vital influence in getting my work to the level that it is today. To all of the lecturers at the Centre for Visual Art, thank you for your support and advice.

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# **CHAPTER ONE: Literature Survey and Methodologies**

## **Introduction:**

This dissertation is founded on an interest in the book arts which was initiated at a bookbinding course, hosted by Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, which I attended in November 2010 at the Centre for Visual Art at the University of Kwazulu Natal. During this course many questions were raised about the possible classification and definition of artists' books as well as the intimate nature of these works. I was drawn to the unique qualities that artists' books possess as art works, and subsequently to the investigation and analysis of these qualities which may possibly influence the reading experience and classification of such books.

'At a point in time where there is much discussion of the end of print culture, the hype of new media and new technology burgeoning forth new forms, more books— and certainly more artist's books— are being produced than ever before in human history' (Drucker 2004:364). Despite this, there appears to be a lack of research in the field of book arts, particularly in South Africa. A limited number of theses (for example: Penn 2009); the website [www.theartistsbook.org.za/](http://www.theartistsbook.org.za/) (maintained by David Paton as a project of the University of Johannesburg) which offers a database of works and artists as well as a number of written works; and the Ginsberg collection in Johannesburg, the most comprehensive collection of artists' books in South Africa (viewable by appointment only), is essentially all that is available. As book arts are becoming more prevalent in art exhibitions, and artists' books are being acquired by galleries as part of their collections, the general lack of information and research in South Africa is something that needs to be addressed.

Artists' books are a relatively new form of art globally and function in a different way to 'conventional' gallery art such as paintings or sculptures in that they are activated by touch in order to be experienced in their entirety. This dissertation will contribute to current research by relating relevant critical discourse and theory to a South African context, specifically looking at the work of two local artists: Cheryl Penn and Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Much of the literature I have read thus far focuses on the debate around what an artist's book really is; there appears as yet to be insufficient emphasis on creating purposeful dialogue around the works themselves. This dissertation will contribute to the



discourse on artists' books by investigating the experience of interacting with such an art work.

The objectives of this study are, firstly, to establish a parameter or working definition of artist's books (here referring to unique books, not editions or mass produced books). This includes establishing where and how artists' books fit into the field of book arts and by extension how they relate to the art world more generally. This enquiry will be drawn from a number of discourses and theories in the field (Drucker 2004; Alexander, Higgins 1995; Sowden, Bodman 2010). The book *Sound from the Thinking Strings* (1991) by South African artist Pippa Skotnes will be used in this section particularly to exemplify points in the ongoing debate as to how artists' books might be classified.

Secondly, this project aims to investigate a set of characteristics or elements present in artists' books that may be of use in reaching a set of criteria for the critical analysis of such works. Elements such as tactility (haptics), intimacy, text, space, and shape which affect the readability and experience of an artist's book from the perspective of the recipient are an important part of the research. Both the proposed criteria and characteristics will be useful tools in documenting the experience of reading artists' books. Works by Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Penn will serve to exemplify each of the abovementioned elements.

The studio component of my MAFA degree centres on the field of book arts and will culminate in an exhibition consisting of a number of book objects and artist's books. The theoretical research comprising this dissertation therefore shares a close relationship to my own work as an artist.

### **Literature Survey:**

Critical discourse in the field of book arts is a relatively recent development dating back, according to my research, not much earlier than the 1940's in America and Europe.

Johanna Drucker (2004:1) states that the development of artists' books as a separate field is 'particularly marked after 1945, when the artist's book had its own practitioners, theorists, critics, innovators and visionaries.' Nevertheless, there are a number of texts which are fundamental in the writing of this dissertation. In this survey I will outline the

main research questions surrounding artists' books up until this point, with particular emphasis on the arguments presented in my dissertation. This will include a brief investigation into the manner in which questions of defining artists' books as well as the possibility of reaching a satisfactory critical discourse surrounding the works themselves has been approached by others; which conclusions have been reached, which areas are relevant to my study, as well as where there are possible gaps in existing knowledge.

The primary research question has been without doubt: what is an artist's book?

Discussions and critical writings revolve largely around two sub-questions: firstly, what constitutes an artist's book and by extension what characteristics must be present in order for a book to be called such; and secondly, how artists' books may be classified. Both of these questions will comprise a large part of my research paper, forming the basis of chapter two.

There are a number of varying responses to the question: what is an artist's book. The emergence of electronic art adds a further complication to the question in that the work becomes something other than a physical book. Drucker, seen as one of the leading critics in the field of book arts, writes in *The Century of Artists' Books* that 'there are no limits to what artists' books can be and no rules for their construction,' (2004:364) whilst Vogler maintains that readers should 'resist the temptation to embrace too broad a definition of 'the book' ' (Vogler 2000:458). In her book *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America* (2005) Betty Bright offers a basic definition of an artist's book: 'an artist's book is a book made by an artist... Every aspect of the book -from content to materials to format- must respond to the intent of the artist and cohere into a work that is set in motion with a readers touch' (2005:3). Bright's above statement serves as an important link to the question of haptics and the artist's book, whilst also prompting the beginning of a discussion on which factors or elements contribute to the 'experience' of reading an artist's book.

Drucker responds to the question surrounding the classification of artists' books by placing them in a 'zone of activity' due to their situation at the 'intersection of a number of different disciplines' (Drucker 2004:1). In *A Manifesto for the Book* (2010) Tom Sowden and Sarah Bodman put forward the ABTREE diagram in an attempt towards classification. The skeleton diagram that they created was passed on to various contributors who were asked to adapt the diagram according to their personal definition or ideas of classification

of elements falling under the umbrella of 'book arts.' The results were diverse and reinforced the understanding of the difficulties in classifying this field of works. In an interview by Sowden and Bodman, Radoslaw Nowakowski (Polish book artist and writer) states that 'it's very easy to indicate the extreme points: that's a book object, that's concrete poetry, this is fine press, that's li[t]erature. The problem is that you make such classifications and suddenly you find hundreds of books that are precisely in between' (Sowden, Bodman 2010:22).

The debate regarding reaching a coherent and globally accepted discourse for this field is a long-standing discussion that is closely linked to the classification of artists' books. Sowden and Bodman attempt to address this with their ABTREE diagram, a very useful classification tool as it includes all, or most, works that could possibly be considered as artists' books. There seems to be a general consensus that new ways of reading and new critical discourses are necessary when considering artists' books. In *Talking the Boundless Book: Art, Language, and the Book Arts*, edited by Charles Alexander and Dick Higgins, Steven Clay puts forward that the 'language of normative criticism is not geared towards the discussion of an experience, which is the main focus of most artists' books' (1995:20). There is a call for different ways of reading and approaching artists' books, and as a result a largely hermeneutic or meta-critical approach has been adopted by a number of writers.

Karen Wirth provides a compelling argument in her essay *Re-reading the Boundless Book*, surmising that any critic can place the book within any number of critical discourses and that there are an infinite number of possible approaches to it (Wirth 1995:140). Wirth asserts that each reader should take a stance, essentially taking a hermeneutic approach, and that conversation surrounding the field is of utmost importance (1995:143). In the same book Drucker writes on the *Critical Meta-language for the Book as an Art Form* and the intimacy which books have with their readers, acknowledging the need for a dialogue between the 'personal, private voice and a critical, theoretical voice' (1995:27). This leans also towards a hermeneutic approach and prompts a consideration of the individual 'experience' of artists' books.

The origins, history, and development of artists' books are included as an important part of most research bodies. Generally, it is agreed upon that artists' books emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Drucker 2004; Sowden, Bodman 2010) with mention of Ed Ruscha's 26

*Gasoline Stations* (1962) as one of the seminal pieces in the development of this field (Hubert, Hubert 1999:7). Although this topic has largely been approached from an historical perspective, there is a distinctive emphasis on the future of artists' books. The influence and inclusion of electronic book art is addressed by Drucker (2004:2), although only briefly as her primary focus is on physical, tactile book objects. Sowden and Bodman readily include electronic books as part of their arguments (2010:5), while McCaffery emphasizes the importance of the physicality of books (2000:17). This dissertation will focus on the physical artist's book.

Difficulties in the display of artists' books both in art galleries and libraries (Hoffberg 2007) is another question commonly addressed. The 'dual nature' of artists' books, in terms of being both book and art is addressed by Betty Bright (2005); an important part of this is the haptic and interactive nature of artists' books. The physicality of these works cannot be ignored and is mentioned without fail in every book and article I have read up until this point. Haptics in particular have been dealt with by Gary Frost (2005). He raises the question of the importance of haptics as a tool with which to begin a critical analysis of artists' books. Haptics are dealt with briefly in an article *Haptics and the Habitat of Reading* ([futureofthebook.com](http://futureofthebook.com)) and by researcher Anne Mangen, *The Technologies and Haptics of Reading* (<http://e-boekenstad.nl/unbound/index.php/anna-mangen-on-the-technologies-and-haptics-of-reading/>).

Overall, despite debates and contradicting ideas, the conclusions seem to be unanimous. The field of artists' books is too broad and too mobile to be rigidly, or concretely, defined. This dissertation will, nevertheless, attempt to offer some clarification as to the nature and classification of artists' books based on writings by book arts theorists, my own experience, and research into the work of two prominent local book artists, Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. In addition, this dissertation will serve to fill a gap in the existing research on South African book artists in the investigation of some of the work by Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen.

## **Methodologies:**

In the context of artists' books, where physical as well as personal and intimate interaction with the work is a key element in fully experiencing the work and discovering its meaning, the high level of objectivity expected when researching quantitatively would be difficult to maintain. The tactile and intimate nature of these works require interactive and observational studies, and personal interaction with each artist's book is imperative in documenting the individual qualities that the works possess as well as the experience of viewing or reading such works. Discussions and interviews with the artists Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, as well as contextual and interpretational studies will form a part of this research where appropriate.

Johanna Drucker puts forward the idea that there is a need for a critical language describing structures and methods in any art form involving self-consciousness and self-reflexivity; this is the meta-critical (2004:161). Due to the process of intimate discovery that takes place when interacting with an artist's book, a meta-critical approach becomes a central part of research in terms of documenting this experience, as well as in literature analysis and interpretation. Meta-criticism is essentially a criticism of criticism, in which the underlying principles of critical interpretation and discourse are investigated or examined (<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/Metacriticism.html>). In a sense, it is a re-evaluation of critical discourse which is necessary when investigating artists' books.

Where meta-criticism re-evaluates accepted critical discourses, hermeneutics, or more specifically hermeneutical aesthetics, places emphasis on the individual experience of art. Although hermeneutics are relevant to many aspects of visual culture it has come to be a key methodology in the analysis and interpretation of the experience of viewing or reading an artist's book.

Hermeneutical aesthetics place particular emphasis on the fact that 'art works do not merely re-interpret and re-present subject matters but extend and alter their being' (Davey 1999:4). This is what many book artists attempt to do in their creation of an artist's book, either by altering an existing book or by altering the recipients' perception of what a book is. The hermeneutic method of interpretation leans away from 'normative' or intellectually based criticism, rather taking into account the 'qualitative and/or particular experience of art' (Whitely 1999:99). The emphasis that hermeneutical aesthetics places on the personal

or individual experience of an art work (both haptically and visually) can be separated into two main areas. Firstly, an investigation into what happens to the viewer in their experience of art, and the 'philosophical and existential determinants' that may shape the individuals perceptions of art; and secondly, taking the above reflection into account, the question of meaning must be considered in some detail (Davey 1999:3).

Drawing on the theories of German philosopher Hans Gadamer, Dick Higgins provides a metaphor further explaining the concept of hermeneutics (1996:102). He describes each viewer as having an individual 'horizon' and an individual hermeneutic which corresponds to their horizon, while the artwork simultaneously has its own horizon. When the viewer comes into contact with the artwork these horizons meet and the viewer leaves with a slightly altered horizon, or hermeneutic. This metaphor is particularly relevant to the book arts in that the reader has to engage with the book on an intimate and personal level in order to turn the pages or read the text, for example; these 'horizons' meet through touch and are altered through the physical interaction of the reader with the work.

Exegesis and empirical knowledge will come into play in the use of both meta-criticism and hermeneutics and hermeneutic aesthetics. As the field of book arts is one that I am currently actively involved in, relevant existing discourse will be discussed, evaluated and analysed according to my own knowledge and theories relating to this dissertation. My own experience of artists' books (specifically in the works of Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Cheryl Penn) will play an important part in the conclusions reached in this dissertation.

Lastly, formal analysis will be of importance in chapter three in which the elements affecting the readability and general experience of an artist's book as well as the works of Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen will be looked at in some detail. In the attempt to classify artists' books, formalist analysis and the list of formal elements of art it supplies, cannot be ignored as it forms a foundation for the aesthetic analysis of any art work as well as for the addition of any relevant characteristics in a given field or genre.

All formal analysis is 'an explanation of visual structure, of the ways in which certain visual elements have been arranged and function within a composition'

(<http://www.writingaboutart.org/pages/formalanalysis.html>). The purpose of formal analysis is to explain how different elements come together to create a whole and by

extension the effect that the 'whole' has on the viewer. In terms of this dissertation, Rudolf Arnheim's theory on formal analysis (2004) is the most appropriate in its relation to artists' books. Rather than being based purely on aesthetic qualities of art, Arnheim focuses on the relation of art with perception and psychology and based his analyses of works on this relationship. Arnheim analysed works by the following set of formal elements: 'balance, shape, form, growth, space, light, colour, movement, tension and expression.' Shape, volume, and composition were his primary focus (<http://www.writingaboutart.org/pages/formalanalysis.html>).

In the following chapter the question of what an artist's book is will be addressed in some detail. Based on relevant critical discourses, an attempt will be made to classify artists' books in terms of their situation within both the art and literature fields as well as in relation to the intimate experience of such books; this will include a consideration of certain formal elements which are of significance in reaching a suitable conclusion as to the classification of artists' books.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Classifying the Artists' Book**

### **Introduction:**

This chapter is principally concerned with the question: what is an artist's book? When considering the field of book arts, which is ultimately geared towards intimate experience, this is almost without doubt the question that is most frequently addressed. Artists' books come in such a large variety of shapes, sizes, textures, and materials it is no wonder at the debates that have developed surrounding the classification of these works; the fact that artists' books can be placed at the junction of a number of different creative disciplines is part of what makes these works so difficult to classify. Artists' books 'take every possible form, participate in every possible 'ism' of mainstream art and literature, every possible mode of production, every shape, every degree of ephemerality or archival durability' (Drucker 2004:14). This leads to another prevalent debate surrounding the book arts: where can artists' books be situated most comfortably within the art world. The abovementioned debate as well as the question of what an artist's book is will be addressed in detail in this chapter.

To state it simply, as noted in chapter one, any book made by an artist may be called an artist's book (Bright 2005:3); in other words, any book in which the entire content and process are the artist's. For many critics however, this is perhaps too simple an explanation. Criticism in the field requires a definition (if it can be so named) with more substance, one that includes all possible forms of artists' books and investigates all possible aspects involved in their creation. In spite of this, questions are often raised as to whether *any* book created by an artist can be classified as an artist's book, and if not then what are the essential elements that make a book an artist's book? This chapter as well as the next, in greater detail, will explore some of the characteristics and elements that make a successful artist's book.

### **Descriptive Terms:**

As every experience of an artist's book is intimate and therefore unique, there is much debate around the correct descriptive term for this new art form. 'Artists' Publishing' was the term initially settled on by Tom Sowden and Sarah Bodman in their *A Manifesto for*



*the Book* as it seemed to cover all works, from electronic to physical publications. This term, however, did not suit many artists for two main reasons: firstly, it removed the word ‘book’ which is without a doubt the central component of the field; and secondly, the term ‘publication’ tends to define works which are produced in multiple and then distributed, therefore not allowing for the inclusion of single editions. ‘Unique and sculptural books are no small part of the artists’ books world and the term publishing does not appear to include these works’ (Sowden, Bodman 2010:5). The term ‘artists’ books’ appeared to be the least inclusive term of all as it refers only to itself. However, where this term is inappropriate for describing the discipline as a whole, it is a fitting description when referring to the end product of an artist’s work. In the end ‘book arts’ was decided on as the most inclusive descriptive term, it includes both ‘book’ and ‘art’ which is of great concern with many of the artists in question; this term helps them to identify their ‘realm of practice,’ allowing ‘the genre to extend its previous limits, if you can add arts to book it implies all works surrounding and related to the subject – ‘art’ adds an extension to the definition of a book’ (2010:6).

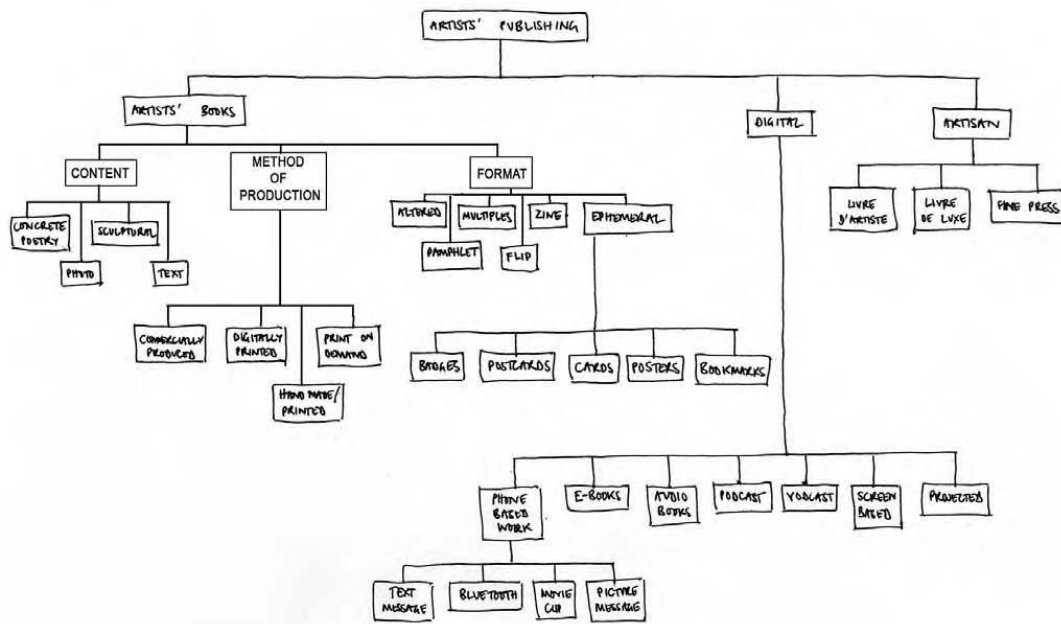
I have chosen, for the purposes of this dissertation to use the terms ‘book art’ and ‘artist’s book.’ ‘Book art’ is used as an umbrella term, covering everything from illustration to book objects to artists’ books. This term allows us to consider the book as an art object, creating ‘a certain artspace in the framework of the book’ in which artists may experiment as they wish (Sayenko in Sowden, Bodman 2010:43). The term ‘artist’s book’ is used to cover any book entirely made by an artist; as these objects are essentially a synthesis of two worlds, both book and art (Bright 2005:xiii, xiv,1). If the term artist’s book or book arts is to be used, however, the relation to ‘bookness’ is an important element to consider in the creation and classification of such works (Drucker 2004:123); ‘the central theme of an artist’s book is that it has a relationship, however tangential, to what we consider a book, whilst implicitly challenging its authority’ (Elliot in Sowden, Bodman 2010:55). The book itself becomes the container, ‘a means of transport for its content’ (Stolts in Sowden, Bodman 2010:29).

Drucker disagrees with the statement that any book made by an artist may be called an artist’s book and maintains that ‘anything goes’ is too broad for this field (2004:6); in order to maintain a level of quality there needs to be some form of

classification, possibly comprising a list of elements or necessary components that every artist's book should contain, or at least a set of guidelines pointing in this direction. Artists' books have attained an identity over the preceding hundred years which 'synthesizes the traditions of the craft of the book, the visions of fine press and independent publishing, and the conceptual artistic idea of the multiple in all its variations into a form which did not exist before' (Drucker 2004:362). Although this dissertation does not focus on multiples, but rather single editions, the multiple in its various forms (pamphlets, brochures, postcards etc.) should not be overlooked as an influence when looking at the book arts.

As a starting point in this dissertation artists' books should be in the format of a tangible book, however loosely, or at the very least be made from pieces of another book in order to be considered artists' books. It is important in this context not to embrace too broad a definition of 'the book'; it should be approached in its material and historical specificity rather than including 'anything with a semblance of a text' (Vogler 2000:458). This imperative relationship to the physical book form (the haptic) is largely the reason that I will not be considering postcards or cards, pamphlets or brochures, electronic or digital books in this dissertation.

In *A Manifesto for the Book* Tom Sowden and Sarah Bodman put forward the ABTREE diagram, a basic 'family tree,' if you will, of the book arts. A copy of the ABTREE diagram was passed on to each of the artists interviewed for the book with instructions to add, subtract, link, or unlink wherever they thought appropriate based on their personal idea of what constitutes book arts. The influence of the multiple on the book arts is illustrated in a number of the following diagrams. As will be evident in the samples of ABTREE diagrams to follow, not one diagram was returned the same. These diagrams illustrate clearly the personal, intimate nature of artists' books – every person approaches an artist's book with their own hermeneutic or idea of what the book should be. Artists' books encapsulate an intimate experience.



Revisions by Karen Hanmer

Figure 1: Karen Hanmer, *ABTREE diagram*, 2010. Sowden, Bodman: 159

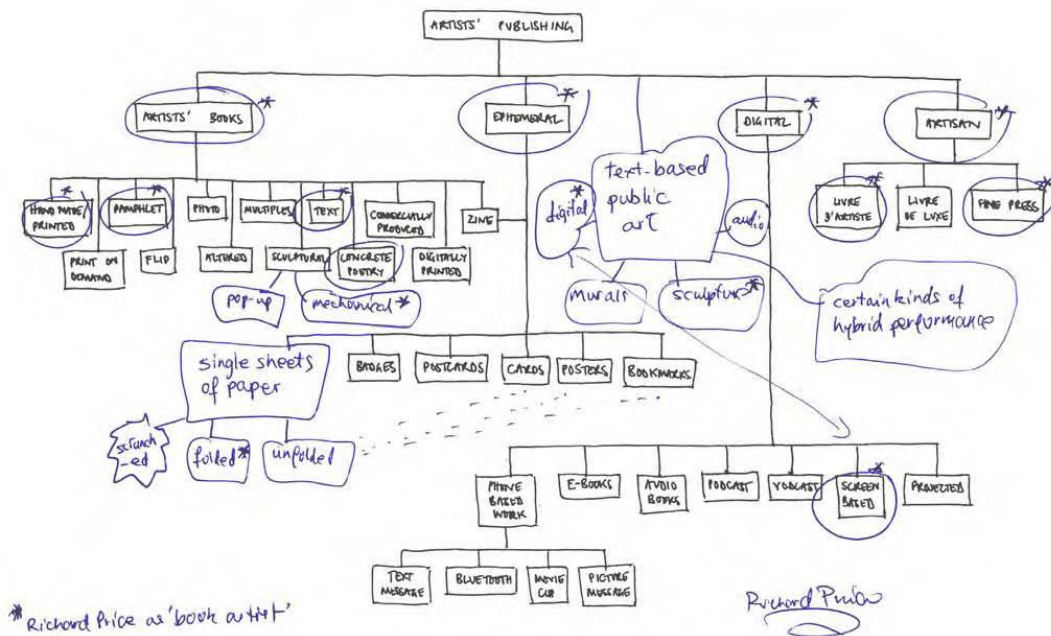


Figure 2: Richard Price, *ABTREE diagram*, 2010. Sowden, Bodman: 142

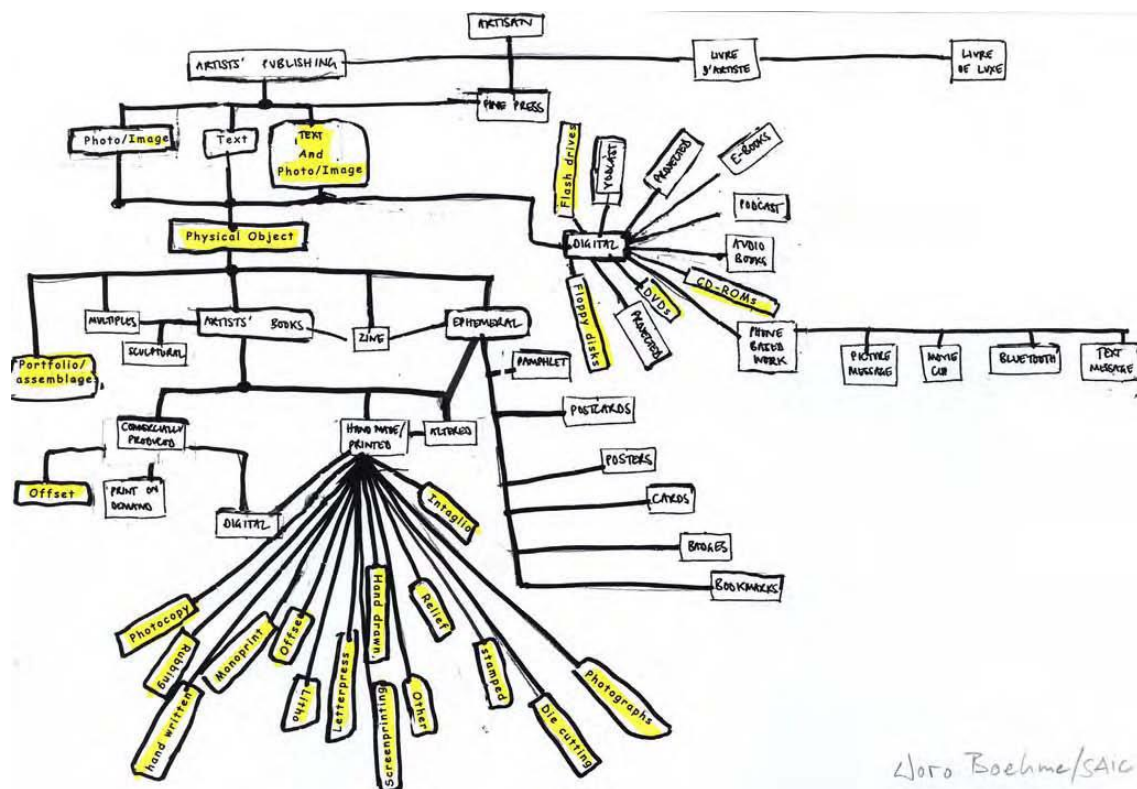


Figure 3: Doro Böhme, *ABTREE diagram*, 2010. Sowden, Bodman: 98

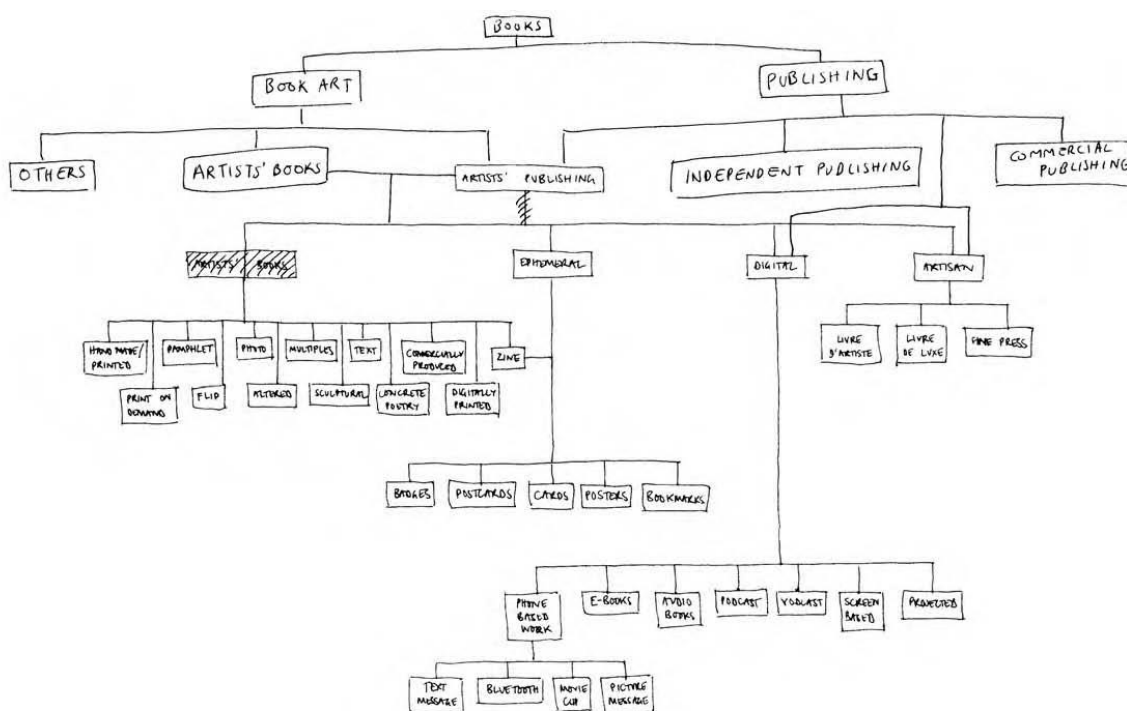


Figure 4: Kyoko Tachibana, *ABTREE diagram*, 2010. Sowden, Bodman: 68

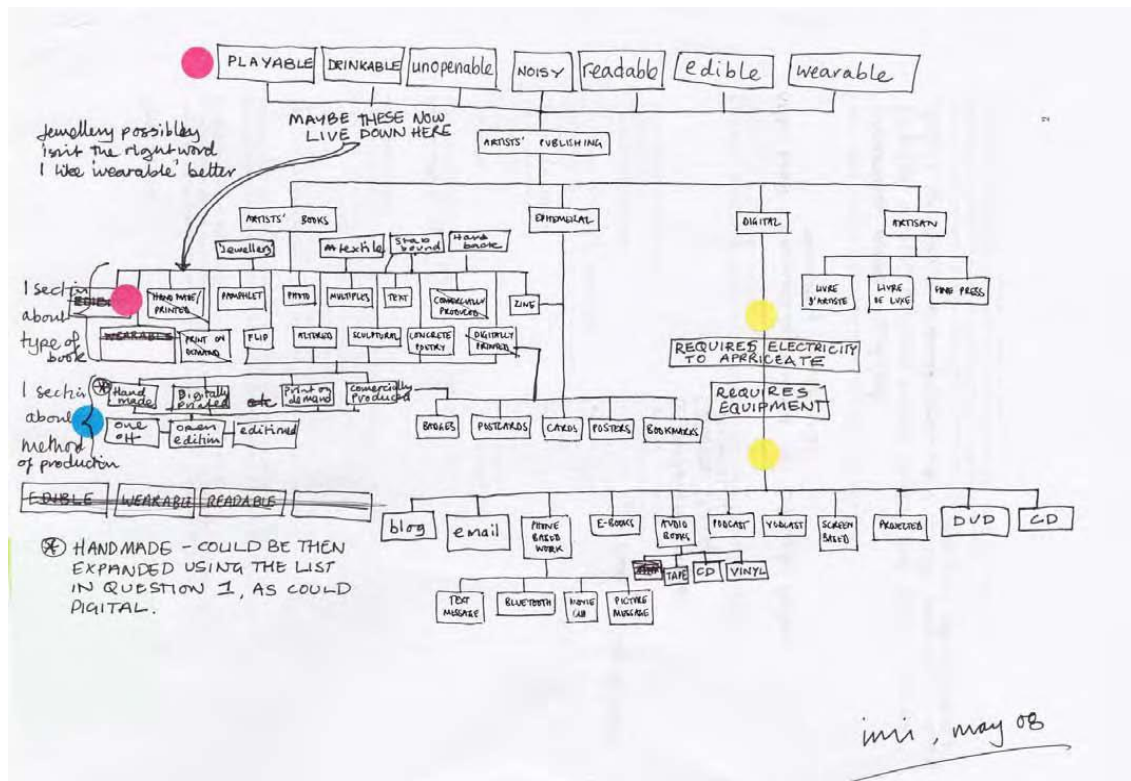


Figure 5: Imi Maufe, *ABTREE* diagram, 2010. Sowden, Bodman: 24

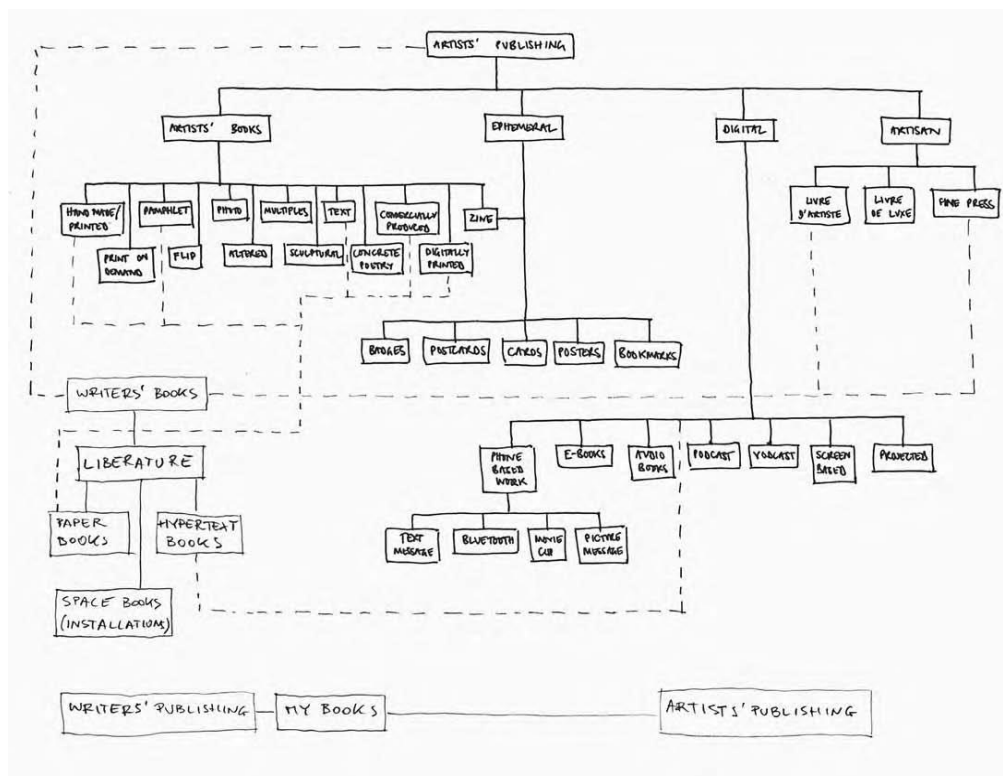


Figure 6: Radoslaw Nowakowski, *ABTREE* diagram, 2010. Sowden, Bodman: 10

Figures 1 through 6 offer a sample of the many different views or approaches towards classifying the book arts. In Figure 1 Karen Hanmar begins to look at different ways of categorizing artists' books based on characteristics that may be considered a part of formal analysis, using an academic approach similar to that of Drucker. Content, format, and method of production are her primary defining factors. She does not class digital works as artists' books which aligns with my particular way of thinking; placing importance on the tangibility of books as hand-held art. Once off and unique designs are labelled as artisan, emphasizing both the artistic techniques and craftsmanship involved in the creation of artists' books.

Richard Price (Figure 2) highlights the methods that he uses as a book artist, drawing attention to the hermeneutic or personal views on what an artist's book may be. A painting is a painting, a sculpture is a sculpture. When looking at one or the other there is very little room to doubt exactly what it is you are looking at. Artists' books do not always offer this immediate clarity, as Price illustrates in his ABTREE diagram by his inclusion of 'text-based public art.' In doing this Price takes one of the most fundamental components of a book, i.e. text, and separates it from the book form entirely by using it as a base for performance art or murals; this is an approach that would undoubtedly meet with some opposition. The haptic element of the artist's book is removed entirely, the book as hand-held art no longer exists in this scenario, illustrating the dangers of embracing too broad a definition of the book.

Doro Böhme (Figure 3) considers the great number of influences that make up each artist's book. She separates the handmade or physically made works from the digitally printed works. Surprisingly, she places 'artists' books' quite low down on the diagram, under 'physical object'; digital productions are included under the banner of artists' publishing but are not considered to be artists' books as they are missing the haptic element.

In Figure 4 Kyoko Tachibana emphasises the actual book, assigning it more importance than any other element or creative process; an approach perhaps more in line with this dissertation than Price, for example. In this ABTREE diagram the terms 'artists' books' and 'artists' publishing' are synonymous, although termed separately from publishing. The inclusion of crossing outs and corrections both in this diagram and in Figure 5 illustrates

the complexity of categorizing artists' books, highlighting the intensely personal and intimate nature of the book arts.

Figure 5 is perhaps the most adventurous of the ABTREE's included in this dissertation. Imi Maufe opens up the field of book arts to all kinds of possibilities, focussing on the many different creative processes used in the production of artists' books. The importance of the book as a physical object in itself is played down; rather, elements of the book are used in the creation of new things. It is evident that the physicality of artists' books is important to Maufe. A thought-provoking element in this diagram is the mention of digital books requiring equipment and electricity to be appreciated, thereby excluding certain members of society. Artists' books on the other hand more often than not require no equipment other than eyesight and sense of touch; as text is not always paramount, it is possible that even the illiterate could make sense of such a book to some extent based purely on imagery and haptics.

In Figure 6 the original ABTREE diagram is more clearly visible. Radoslaw Nowakowski has a more conservative, or perhaps traditional, approach to the book arts, allowing for little variation on the book form. He does however bring attention to the 'space book,' in other words the artist's book functioning as an installation piece. This idea will be investigated in greater detail further on in this chapter.

### **Situating the Book Arts:**

The concept of artists' books being both book and art sparks a lively debate surrounding the balance of the two concepts. The 'dual nature' of artists' books undoubtedly complicates any attempt to classify the discipline (Bright 2005:6); do artists' books belong in libraries amongst books or in art galleries amongst works of art? If we were to create a linear scale with books on the one end and art on the other, would artists' books be more comfortably placed closer to books or art or precisely in the middle?

In considering where to situate artists' books most comfortably another question arises: this is whether the audience should be termed as 'viewers' or 'readers'. Such a decision depends greatly on where artists' books fit on the scale between books and art. Wirth suggests that in all the reasons for artists making books and all the labels these artists are



given, in all the subjects addressed in these works and in all the mediums used, the central meeting place remains the book (Wirth 1995:138). A book requires reading. Frost links the term 'reader' with the tactile qualities of artists' books (2005:3). Reading seems to imply a more considered or even active (intelligent, perhaps introspective?) approach, it requires touch, the haptic element that is important in artists' books, whereas viewing does not. Artists' books tend to require a greater effort on the reader's part than ordinary books would; this calls for a change in reading habits and the willingness of the reader to 'venture into a completely new domain... an artist's book requires the reader to measure up to it' (Hubert, Hubert 1999:242). Artists' books require more than simple viewing to be understood fully, they require a measure of intimate engagement; it is for this reason that the term 'reader' will be used in this dissertation.

For a number of critics, 'it would appear that there is a directly inverse ratio between the artwork and the interpretation – the less visually demanding the artwork, the more intellectually demanding the theory and interpretation of the artwork' (Whitely 1999:117). This could be a part of the reason why artists' books haven't quite made it into mainstream art criticism; they are by nature personal, becoming a part of the reader's intimate space. As a result of their intimate nature artists' books require a personal contemplation, an individual interpretation by the reader; more perhaps than a painting, for example, which may be viewed in its entirety without particular effort by the viewer (Penn 2009:6-8). In my experience, artists' books are inherently visually, and often physically, demanding: the images, text, textures, and unexpected shapes which frequently change from page to page make it necessary for the reader to maintain a constant level of involvement in order to view the entire work.

According to Bright, 'several issues have arisen from the confusing dual nature of the artist's book as art and book. One issue concerns whether the artist's book has helped to enlarge our sense of what constitutes art and art making... It can insinuate itself into a reader's consciousness while it delivers content that may be unexpected or disturbing' (2005:6). With statements such as this one in mind there comes to be a clear link between artists' books and certain theories and art of postmodernism. Postmodern art is known to resist 'the master narrative of modernism, and the authority of high art... it worries about its own language... it disrupts narrative... pays attention to hitherto marginalized forms of identity and behaviour' (Butler 2002:64), just as the book arts do. Postmodernism is often



described as blurring the boundaries or even destroying distinctions between the 'established cultural hierarchies by introducing themes and images from mass or popular culture into the prestige forms of high culture, such as literature and the fine arts' (Wheale 1995:34). In their resistance to classification as well as in the combination of books and literature with the arts, the book arts potentially change the way in which both of these fields are viewed. Artists' books cause the reader to question that which is the book and that which is art, essentially disrupting an extensively accepted narrative of what is or is not art and what is or is not a book.

'What a book is can be challenged, and its perceived history could change' (Sowden, Bodman 2010:9). Given the postmodern society in which we live, the same argument can be applied to almost anything, including works of art. As mentioned above, artists' books, like postmodernism, defy easy classification. It is perhaps their challenging of what we know that allows an artist's book to be considered a work of art. Another of the characteristics or classifying elements, if you will, of postmodernism that is found in varying degrees in the book arts is 'hybridization'. This occurs when artists combine a number of 'materials, genres, and period references to produce highly eclectic constructions, both in content and form' (Wheale 1995:120). If this hybridization, which could also be called eclecticism, is considered as something that postmodern artworks should embody, an artist's book can be looked at as a prime example of a work of art that is situated within postmodernism.

Many artists' books not only include themes and images from numerous sources, but combine them in such a way that blurs the boundaries between literature and the fine arts. In order to come to an accepted classification of artists' books, therefore, the focus cannot purely be on the 'book' of book arts. There is a need to briefly address the question of what qualifies as a work of art, and why this is so. Clive Bell attempts to classify art works by arguing that there is one quality which all works of art have in common: this, he believes, is significant form. 'There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless...Only one answer seems possible – significant form'. According to Bell, each work possessing significant form has the power to stir our aesthetic emotions by particular combinations of lines and colours, certain forms and relations of forms (Warburton 2003:21).

Morris Weitz, however, disagrees with Bell's theory for a number of reasons. In response he argues that any traditional aesthetic theory, or any attempt to define art 'forecloses on the very conditions of creativity in the arts' (Warburton 2003:73) by trying to define what cannot, or should not, be defined. Weitz views art as a concept which does not exist as a precisely definable thing; more specifically, he refers to art in the context of open and closed concepts. Within a closed concept 'necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the concept can be given'; art, according to Weitz, is an open concept. Open concepts allow the audience to make the decision as to whether or not to extend the concept to cover a new object (2003:72). For the purposes of the arguments presented in this dissertation, the abovementioned theories of both Bell and Weitz have value; significant form because the proper combination of elements in an artist's book should affect the readers aesthetic emotion in some way, and the idea of art as an open concept because it allows for the inclusion of artists' books in the larger world of fine arts. In addition to this, both theories allow for intimate discovery and experience through the active involvement of the reader. Artists' books function in such a way that the reader is expected to come to their own interpretation of the work through interaction with the texts, images and materials that make up the work. Inspiration for an artist's book is found in a great number of sources which 'mirrors the postmodern art genre, where inspiration is drawn from anything, anywhere, anytime, from the small personal narratives of daily life, to the great mega narratives of the past' (Penn 2009:36).

Similarly to words such as 'self, author, and reader,' *book* is not a word which can be easily defined; 'the book arts, perhaps, are specifically arguments against definition and limitation, as artists and writers strive to break the bindings of what has traditionally been considered a book' (Alexander 1995:9). As with other fields, installation art for example, which falls under postmodernism, artists' books allow or even require versatility in the use of materials; and, as they are by nature complex, intertextuality as well as multi-media experimentation are often a large part of these works (Hubert, Hubert 1999:7). The juxtaposition of seemingly contradicting and vastly different styles that is commonly used by postmodern artists and in the book arts means that works often have multiple meanings, are often 'double-coded,' and can therefore be viewed on multiple levels (Penn 2009:127). Many of the innovative practices of postmodern art require interpretations that rely 'on such leading

theoretical notions as reflexivity, which arises from the artist's self-consciousness concerning artistic method and ideology, including making the work a critique of previous generic restraints' (Butler 2002:85).

Artists' books could perhaps in their own right be considered installations. John Broadus writes that 'rather than looking for the projected cohesion of a tightly knit poem' when looking at artists' books, 'we had best settle for the looser kind of relatedness found in assemblage and, more often, in installation art' (Hubert, Hubert 1999:11). Book artists do not often consider their works as flat objects or bound pages but rather as an 'extra-dimensional form existing in time as well as in space' (Bright 2005:77). The relation of the pages in an artist's book with each other and in space as they are turned by the reader creates not only a dialogue between opposite pages but also adds a new dimension to an essentially two-dimensional or flat object. Every aspect of the book, every page, every blank area even, is considered to be a space rather than a frame or a background; 'the whole area becomes a dynamic composition in which every square inch functions... The various parts are not merely consecutive but continuous, and their relative position in time is considered in the design' (2005:77) thus creating an installation of sorts.

Installation art, in a similar way to artists' books is an art form that cannot easily be defined in terms of traditional media. It is defined, rather, in relation to the message it expresses through many different means. Early attempts 'to define [i]nstallation art by medium alone failed because it is in the nature of the practice itself to challenge its own boundaries' (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 2003:14); this mirrors the questions previously mentioned in this chapter surrounding the definition of artists' books. It is the interrogative process of installation art that creates a discourse which investigates the relationship between the artist and the audience. Installation art has come to be defined by this process of essentially intimate interaction between artist, art work, and audience; this 'has led to artists working with materials and methodologies not traditionally associated with the visual arts' (2003:14). The nature of artists' books as interactive works in which every page, space, or shape functions in terms of the whole offers a dynamic experience for the reader; this allows artists' books to be fairly comfortably placed under the umbrella of installation art.

One of the ways in which artists effectively make the transition from two-dimensional book to three-dimensional work to possible installation piece is through the use of ‘novelty devices’ (Carothers 2000:319). Artists’ books often function as ‘a philosophical vehicle for a very private approach to the world. Furthermore, they display creativity through the bidimensional and tridimensional aesthetic sensibility’ (Durante 2005:34). Such books that make use of novelty devices, such as pop-up elements or hidden pockets containing text, image, or even object for example, ‘combine mental participation with physical manipulation’ (Carothers 2000:319) enabling the reader to intimately explore complex themes not only visually but multi-dimensionally and haptically.

Aside from the potential of the book arts to function as installations, certain artists’ books may even be considered as transviromental. The term ‘transviroment’ implies ‘a high concentration of context-altering energy within a frame-construct’ (Quasha 1996:94). Transviromental works cause the viewer to observe specific or known surroundings in a new way; as installation art often does, transviromental works invoke a certain amount of engagement with the conception of the work (1996:94). ‘A transviroment is a transformationally experienced environment. It is a construct – it may even be a construction or artefact – that creates an opportunity for a fundamental alteration in perception and interpretation of the surrounding world, the content and circumtext’ (1996:93). The book arts have the potential to alter the reader’s environment by taking the ‘traditional’ notion of the book made to impart knowledge, to be read or shelved, and creating works of art which resemble these books in some way but which require a completely different method of display and level of interaction. Transviromental art alters in some ways the perceptual means by which we recognise any transactional possibilities that are available to us. Artists’ books do this perhaps by enhancing these possibilities or even reminding the reader of certain transactional possibilities through the use of ‘novelty devices’, materials, shapes, spaces and textures (Carothers 2000:319). The most fundamental transactional possibility that is altered by an artist’s book is perhaps the initial step taken by the reader in physically handling the work of art; this is an action that goes against what has been taught in galleries for centuries, that art should be seen but not touched. After this there can be any number of transactions that take place between the reader and the artist’s book: for example, the experience of shape and texture, or the intimacy of memories or emotions triggered by the text or images within the work.

In the world of the transviromental, art is considered somewhat paradoxical; in one way its purpose is to effectively or efficiently aid certain transactions, yet in other ways, particularly in view of postmodern art, artists seek to interrupt, or disrupt, transactional patterns with which the viewer is familiar (Quasha 1996:96,97). It follows, naturally, that these transactions and transactional possibilities will depend largely on the hermeneutic of the individual reader. Hermeneutic aesthetics stress that rather than interpreting or re-interpreting specific subject matters, artworks 'extend and alter their being' (Davey 1999:4). Artists' books functioning as transviromental objects embody this concept through the way in which they present their content to the reader. The arts, and artists' books in particular, provide a platform for certain intangible qualities such as privacy or intimacy, for example, to 'gain a tangibility of presence' (1999:20); by allowing such qualities to become visible the viewer or reader is able to perceive entities in the world which would not otherwise have been observed (1999:20), thus creating a wealth of previously unfamiliar transactional possibilities.

The artist's book has a very specific function as a transviromental work in that the reader is confronted with images and texts representing thoughts, feelings and ideals; when the reader opens an artist's book they almost immediately enter into a dialogue with it, sometimes even subconsciously. The artist's book, perhaps more so than an ordinary book, has the power to alter the environment of the reader (Quasha 1996:94) by drawing them in through the use of text, image, shape, texture etc. which interact on different levels within the conscious and subconscious. Books, and especially artists' books have a 'power which animates them beyond their material limits, generating a metaphysically charged atmosphere' (Drucker 2004:94); it is the 'visual vocabulary' of such books 'that stirs the imagination, and perhaps reveals new contexts that stimulate emotion, memory and transformation' (Prince 2008:8). This is the fundamental element of a transviromental object, to challenge what it is that is accepted and familiar, revealing new and often thought provoking combinations and contexts. It is for this reason that the book arts and more specifically artists' books can be situated comfortably in this field. Many artists' books 'contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work' through the use of 'culturally loaded objects' as basic material (Stupart 2011:39).

According to Bourriaud, artists' books 'are ready-mades in an entirely different sense to a urinal or a snow shovel, their cultural context more evident, more sacred, and defined by text' (Stupart 2011:39). Whether artists' books are perceived as being more closely related to books or the arts, the use of text in such works is an important element to consider. In the majority of artists' books the book itself serves simply as a starting point, an object to be re-invented, or a text to be redefined; 'as the reader/artist renounces any thread of passivity, the text loses its authority and books simultaneously reclaim their physicality and vulnerability sometimes even gaining corporeality as they are reconstituted as sculptures' (2011:34).

The concept of text in artists' books is not as simple as it may seem and is often a carefully thought out element of the whole. Although not always the case, in many instances text may be seen as being secondary to the form, images and textures in an artist's book, which should come together to bring a complete experience to the reader. In such cases adding text may be considered redundant or unnecessary. However, as text is generally expected to be found in a book, the lack of text could speak to the reader as well. It can be considered, therefore, that artists' books are defined by text while at the same time often eradicating some of the authority that has been accredited to it, whether the artist includes text in the work or not. There is the potential for text or the lack of text in an artist's book to function on a subconscious level in the mind of the reader. The reader is capable of adding their own version of a text to every page read, the subconscious text of memories or associations for example, or the text that the reader feels should be included on the page but is not. Reader-oriented theories tend to label the reader as the sight of meaning and not the text. However, as contemporary theory cannot prove that meaning undoubtedly occurs within the reader, any meaning found through a text is more often than not considered an effect of the interaction between the text and the particular reader. Many artists therefore attempt to involve the reader in the process of discovering meaning through the use of unfamiliar typographic structures (Paton 2010:7).

As is evident in the arguments presented thus far in this dissertation there are many possible ways to approach the book arts. Every reader will approach an artist's book with their own hermeneutic, whether consciously or subconsciously; as a result of this there are numerous possible discourses that may arise, broader issues or contexts that may be brought to light by artists' books (Wirth 1995:140). In 1993, artist Pippa Skotnes' *Sound*

*from the Thinking Strings* (1991) became the centre of an extensive court battle. At the heart of this complex legal battle lies the simple question: what is and isn't an artist's book. Where can the line be drawn between a book and an art work?

The Legal Deposit Act is a piece of legislature requiring a copy of every book published in South Africa to be 'deposited' in each of the five Legal Deposits Libraries in the country, at the expense of the publisher (Friedman 1997). When the State Library requested a copy of *Sound from the Thinking Strings* in 1992, Skotnes argued that the book was an original art work and could not be donated free of charge. She feels that 'the Act compromises freedom of creative expression and the artist's right to ownership of creative production' (1997). Here began the court case.

This case sparked debates even amongst renowned book artists. Malcolm Payne felt that it would have 'enormous repercussions for the future of creative freedom in this country' should Skotnes lose this battle (Friedman 1997). While Judith Mason stated that 'while I admire Pippa's strength of principle I am convinced that if a book has pages, text, is printed in an edition and bound – it constitutes a book' (1997). Mason amends her statement by adding that if a book is made as an artist's edition which is expensive and time consuming to produce; it should not fall under this law (1997). Both Payne and Mason have a valid argument and as has been illustrated thus far in this dissertation, this is a debate which could quite easily never be resolved completely. The central issue here, is the fact that the book *Sound from the Thinking Strings* was printed as an original art work and not as an edition to be mass produced. During the court case, the argument from the opposing lawyer was that the 'original' art work would in fact be the etched copper plates, and not the prints made from them which could be copied any number of times (Skotnes 2001).

If we go back to considering a scale with art on the one end and books on the other, surely by creating an edition of more than one artist's book the scale is tipped more towards the 'book' end, and further from the art? In my opinion, and for the purposes of this dissertation, an artist's book should be a one of a kind or unique production in order to be considered such. If it must be an edition each book should then be a hand crafted copy as opposed to a printed or reproduced copy, in other words every book should be distinct in some way from the others in the edition.

After initially winning her case, Skotnes did eventually lose the court case when it was overturned in the Supreme Court and was required to deliver five copies of her book to the various depositories around the country (Friedman 1997).

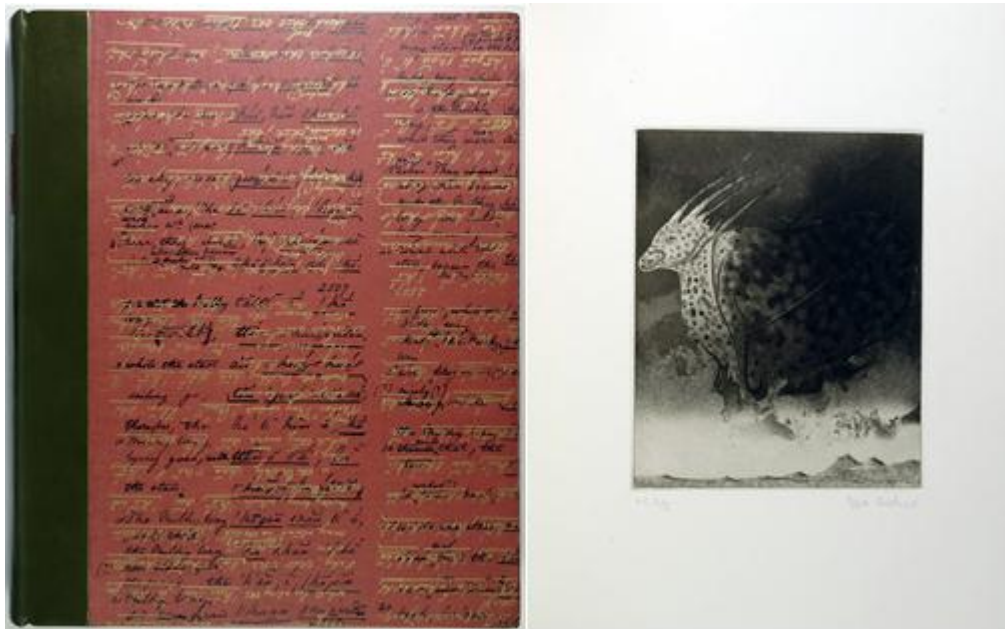


Figure 7: Pippa Skotnes, *Sound from the Thinking Strings*, 1991. Artist's book, etchings and essays on paper, dimensions unknown. Collection: various (edition of 50 books). Photographs <http://www.cca.uct.ac.za/curations/?lid=146> accessed by Phillipa Haskins, 22.06.2013.

This begs the question whether artists' books can really be classified? Our natural tendency is to define, or to keep searching until definition has been reached. Smith states that 'definitions are not ageless laws, but current understanding. They grow with usage through insight and error... our definitions evolve. Definitions are not an end, but a springboard' (Smith 2000: 57,58). There is a danger, in defining something so completely, of developing a certain amount of elitism. It is this freedom within the book arts field that gives artists' books character and unpredictability of form and content. Situated firmly within both the worlds of books and art, artists' books remain true to their nature as part of the postmodernist art movement in the rejection of the elitist attitude by avoiding any kind of definite classification.



An absolute or finite conclusion would potentially impede conversation or discussion, and according to Wirth 'it is in conversation that we challenge this field' (1995: 143). It has been suggested that the lack of a clear definition has allowed artists, and institutions, to explore constructions and ideas freely within the medium of book arts by leaving the field relatively open-ended (Atkinson-Greer 2009:82). The answer to the question of whether there can in fact be a clear definition of the artist's book is at this stage of research a fairly ambiguous one that appears unlikely to reach a global consensus in the near future.

However, in such a case as this the most basic of descriptions could, for the time being, be all that is fundamentally needed. The act of defining is perhaps in itself an act of intimacy, a personal act that cannot be generalized. Drucker provides a fitting definition with which to conclude: 'an artist's book is a work of art that is conceived and executed as a book and does not exist in any other format' (2007:16).

In the following chapter the investigation into artists' books will continue. The characteristics and elements affecting the readability and general experience of artists' books that have been touched on in this chapter will be considered in greater detail; this will include the unique qualities of intimacy and haptics as well as other elements such as narrative and concrete systems, shape, and novelty devices for example. In conjunction to this a number of individual and collaborative works by Cheryl Penn and Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen will be investigated with particular attention to the use of these elements in each work.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Intimate Experience**

### **Introduction:**

This chapter comprises an investigation into some of the characteristics and elements held by artists' books which affect the readability and general experience of such books. Each of these elements will be considered in conjunction with (or in relation to) haptics and intimate discovery and exemplified by a number of artists' books by Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Cheryl Penn. As artists, Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen approach the book arts very differently. Penn began making artist's books around 8 years ago while studying at UNISA; she describes herself as an idea based artist, moving quickly from one idea to the next producing artist's books prolifically and without hesitation (Penn 2013). Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen was first introduced to artists' books in 2008, when she attended Hedi Kyle's bookbinding course in Switzerland. Liebenberg-Barkhuizen describes herself as a paper conservatoire that makes artist's books (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2013). Because of her background in archives, materials and techniques are of the utmost importance in her carefully considered creation of simple and structural artist's books.

As noted, artists' books, with the exception of digital books, provide a different kind of experience to conventional gallery art as they require touch and a certain amount of intimate engagement in order to be viewed in their entirety. This poses something of a challenge for the artist. The fact that the book is going to be handled, not necessarily with care, means that the materials, form, and content take on a new level of importance and as Albers maintains, a purely intellectual approach towards artists' books therefore becomes insufficient (Whitely 1999:118). According to Barilli, when an artwork such as a painting, for example, is presented in a space every 'resource' is revealed simultaneously; so form, structure, and artistic expression are immediately evident to the viewer. He states that 'the artist's book on the other hand, makes use of sequences and series, narratives and/or a systematic collection of information (visual or textural)... in a small, portable format which is interacted with in a private, tactile space, the intimate space of the reader' (Penn 2009:8). According to Penn, as artists' books can be experienced on many levels, both their form and content should have equal meaning and importance (2009:5, 6). The creation and production of artists' books is a laborious process, as works of art they are

difficult to exhibit and frequently misunderstood. Artists' books are multi-interdisciplinary works of art (2009:31), not frequently adhering to traditional book formats; instead often imposing their own distinctive rules in terms of form, materials, and binding methods. It is for this reason that artists' books are considered challenging and unsettling, demanding more from the reader than a conventional book might (Hubert, Hubert 1999:8).

When considering the distinctive, perhaps unusual, interaction between the reader and the art work due to both its haptic and intimate nature one must also consider the fact that there are a number of features of artists' books that may be considered important in the level of success of this interaction. Reaching a common set of elements or characteristics affecting the readability and general experience of artists' books could be an important stepping stone in achieving an acceptable form of analysis for artists' books and will be investigated in some detail in this chapter. In addition to this, identifying these features may contribute to maintaining a level of quality in the production of artists' books. The characteristics that will be discussed in this chapter include intimacy, haptics, text (including narrative and concrete systems), sequence, space, shape and form. Interaction, also a critical element, will be touched on in all of the abovementioned sections.

### **Intimate Discovery and Experience:**

In order to experience the book as an entity rather than a mere object, the process of intimate discovery becomes fundamentally important (Drucker 2004:357). Because books have a legacy, an 'intimate scale', and a daily presence, they have 'the ability to embrace and incite a total experience' for the reader (Clay 1995:25). Artists' books are seldom neutral objects offering purely linguistic content; their structure when combined with their materials and design tends to contribute to the overall experience and meaning of the work rather than simply functioning as a container (Bernstein 1995:39). Ina Blom describes the experience of reading an artist's book as entering a type of 'immersive mode.' In this state of immersion the artist's book functions as a transvironment in which the subjective awareness of the reader begins to merge with the work, thereby creating the 'sensation of a new, more powerful, experience of totality' (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 2003:49). As artists' books are more often than not based on the traditional book format, an intriguing relationship between the reader and the book emerges. The book itself has a linear and

determined order; however, in an artist's book this finite form is 'continually counteracted by the experience of associations produced in the works structure' through the use of various innovations (modernisations) by the artist (Drucker 2004:359).

Novelty devices such as pop-ups, internal flaps or gates, fold-out pictures, or other devices employed by the artist are one way in which intimacy is established with the reader. As previously mentioned, such devices often provide the link between mental participation and physical manipulation. Once a page is encountered physically the reader is compelled to collaborate mentally with its content, particular parts of which are often emphasized through the use of such devices in order to attract the attention of the reader (Carothers 2000:319). One of the major, although perhaps little recognised, influences on the structuring of artists' books is the children's book. 'Noted for their ingenious paper mechanics,' the inclusion of novelty devices in children's books is often employed practically with the intention of attracting the children's attention (Hubert, Hubert 1999:8). According to Hubert, few book artists recognise the influence of children's books, although a 'considerable number of artists' books share many of the characteristics of children's books, subverted in various ways for the pleasure of grown ups' (1999:207). Novelty devices in artists' books serve an 'aesthetically expressive' purpose which compels the adult reader to question their own approach towards the book and the act of reading (1999:8); the deliberate 'child-like' quality of these artists' books 'induce readers to avoid conventional approaches' (1999:207). Novelty devices are intended to keep the reader *in* a page rather than moving hurriedly through the book (Drucker 2004:258). Artists' books that make use of such devices which 'appeal to the tastes of children' (Hubert, Hubert 1999:207) have a distinct advantage in creating an intimate and interactive experience with the reader.

Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's created the book *21<sup>st</sup> February* (2010) after the passing of her mother. This book has a very personal and emotional story to tell and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's layered use of novelty devices serves the purpose of enhancing the content of the story; each element represents something of fading memory and the confusion which results. The page '*Guilt*' for example, opens to reveal four sewn up pockets containing small reminders handwritten by her mother as her memory began to fade. On this page and others Liebenberg-Barkhuizen makes use of layers through which the reader can see two images simultaneously, the top layer being slightly transparent. '*Guilt*' begins as a solid

page on which is drawn a teacup, the reader opens the page to reveal the pockets mentioned above which in turn reveal a portrait of Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's mother through their surface, indicative also of fading memories. The title of this page has significance to the relationship between Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and her mother; the teacup is one of a gilt set given to her by her mother and is a play on the words 'gilt' and 'guilt'. On the very last page of the book the reader finds a pocket (similar to that of a library-card folder) containing handwritten tags that the reader may pull out and read should they wish it.



Figure 8: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *21<sup>st</sup> February*, 2010. Artist's book, mixed media on paper and fabric. Closed book: H 18cm; W 2.5cm; L 18.5cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 9: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *21<sup>st</sup> February*, 2010. Artist's book, mixed media on paper and fabric. Closed book: H 18cm; W 2.5cm; L 18.5cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 10: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *21<sup>st</sup> February*, 2010. Artist's book, mixed media on paper and fabric. Closed book: H 18cm; W 2.5cm; L 18.5cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

The notion of keeping a reader *in* a page instead of *on* a page is an intriguing one. The immediate suggestion is that a page is not simply a two-dimensional surface with text or image, but rather serves as a gateway into another world, a total experience in which the reader often becomes wholly absorbed. Conventionally, books have been viewed as mere containers of information; however, as artists seek to further the active involvement of the readers in the process of reading there tends to evolve a removal of 'the cultural assumptions of the traditional book... transforming it into an expression of artistic integrity and compulsion' (Penn 2009:5). Over the centuries, it seems, books have been defined by certain 'basic conventions' and have as a result become somewhat banal due to the familiarity of, and constant exposure to, these conventions (Paton 2010:12). The process of reading and 'the structures by which books present information, ideas, or diversions, become habitual so that they erase, rather than foreground, their identity.' Artists' books on the other hand create a new identity for books by drawing attention to the 'conceits and conventions' by which books normally efface their own identity, through a self-conscious or self-reflexive involvement by both the artist and the reader (2010:12). Through the interrogation of 'conventional' features of the book format, such as structural, narrative or sequential, material, and textual elements the book artist invites the reader to explore ways in which the book and its content may be enhanced by visual, textual and spacial innovations. The reader and artist thereby begin to investigate not 'what a book *is* but what it *does*' (2010:19).

The capacity of a book to evoke memory is a concept that many book artists investigate, perhaps even unintentionally, at some stage (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 2003:132). Although artists make use of a number of sources, they will often 'depart from personal experience to construct their own spaces of memory,' spaces in which the memories of the reader may also be unconsciously prompted (2003:132). A carefully considered combination of features in an artist's book creates a personal space for an intimate encounter and a potentially intimate recollection of memory (Penn 2009:8). The artist's book provides a platform for the artist to create narratives or 'events' which, when well executed, could leave the reader searching for context or boundaries – combing through their past (even subconsciously) in order to make sense of what they are reading. It seems logical that this would lead to the retrieval of certain memories on some level, whether by touch, sound, smell, text, or image. Hamer argues that the 'reader is as much a writer of

her own experience as the writer of the book is' and that these two roles (reader and writer) are 'much more closely aligned than their contemporary interpretations imply.' This revision places reader and writer on an equal plane, allowing for a dialogue to take place between the two through the medium of the 'book container' and its contents (2012:15).

### **The Haptic Experience:**

Haptics, in its most basic definition, is the technology of touch (Frost 2005:3), and is closely related to the intimacy and experience of an artist's book in that if there were no individual or personal contact between the reader and the artist's book it, and its content, would remain unknown (Penn 2009:1). The ABTREE diagrams in the previous chapter show that books are not only visual, but tactile and spacial as well, their 'physicality is fundamental to their meaning' (Drucker 2004:197). For example: Imi Maufe (Figure 5) allows that artists' books could be playable, drinkable, unopenable, noisy, readable, edible, or wearable. The most obvious reason haptics is considered important is that one cannot experience an artist's book without touch; all of human experience is mediated through the body and 'the degree to which our sensory faculties are stimulated is linked to the impact that an experience has on us' (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 2003:49).

Haptic interaction with an artist's book is the most fundamental of the transactional possibilities that the works offer (as discussed in chapter two, there are many transactional possibilities between reader and artist's book which are set in motion through the initial physical interaction with the art work). The idea of handling an artwork compels the reader to rethink certain learnt behaviours. However, the degree to which haptics actually affect the readability and experience of an artist's book has often come under scrutiny. With regard to the importance of haptics to the relationship between the reader and the artist's book there are two pivotal arguments or schools of thought; exemplified by Gary Frost and Johanna Drucker. Where Frost sees an inseparable relationship between haptics and the experience of the artists' book, Drucker views haptics as a fundamental but small part of the book arts.



In his research Frost questions the degree to which haptics initiate the reader's 'ergonomic of comprehension' and how consequential the haptic characteristics of an object, specifically a book, are to the assessment and experience of book art. As artists' books generally have the unique quality of being hand-held works of art, Frost maintains that the fundamental relationship between the book and the reader is the haptic. 'The whole environment of this experience is tactile, manipulative, confined, tricky and surprising' (Frost 2005:3). Artists' books have the potential ability to control how they are handled and read by imposing on the reader specific tactile and visual reactions (Hubert, Hubert 1999:53). Penn's *Needle Girls* (2009) for example makes use of various mediums and textures which force the reader to handle the book with caution. In order to grasp the full impact of an artist's book, therefore, the reader has to perform various manipulative actions in exploring the spacial and complementary interrelation of pages (Hubert, Hubert 1999:24).

Texture and medium are therefore a very important aspect of artists' books as hand held art. As materials are often carefully selected by artists, these materials and textures when successfully combined with the other features of artists' books evoke memories, emotions and sensations through the readers touch. *Needle Girls* is an extreme example of the use of texture and medium in an artist's book. This book is a continuation of an artist's book called *Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images* (2008), which will be discussed further on. *Needle Girls* is made up of a selection of photographs of the pages within *Histrionic Alphabet*, although it deals with a slightly different subject; it is based on the emotional and hormonal changes in people which result in madness, bodily harm, and self-mutilation and the way in which the skin mediates the act of self-mutilation. The pages of this book represent the skin and have been treated in the same way that troubled people would treat their body: physically cutting, tearing, and inserting pins, thorns and needles into the pages. The result is a book which must be very carefully handled (at the risk of injury), just as the troubled people it represents need to be carefully handled. Penn plays with the idea of control, which is what these people attempt to gain through self-mutilation. The idea that 'the image has no say in what you do to it,' the 'authentic massacre of the innocent image' intrigues Penn and was exploited in the creation of this book. It is a book about 'doing' to the page as is done to skin (Penn 2013).

The use of such intense texture and non-traditional media opens the door to the book functioning as a transvvironment. The idea of a book being able to physically harm you is a transactional possibility that is explored extensively in this particular book.



Figure 11: Cheryl Penn, *Needle Girls*, 2009. Unique artist's book, photographs from collaborative book with Marianne Meijer, needles, pins, thorns, razor blades, nails, staples, screws, bandage, turpentine, oil paint, thread, H 10cm; W 20cm; L 17cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 12: Cheryl Penn, *Needle Girls*, 2009. Unique artist's book, photographs from collaborative book with Marianne Meijer, needles, pins, thorns, razor blades, nails, staples, screws, bandage, turpentine, oil paint, thread, H 10cm; W 20cm; L 17cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 13: Cheryl Penn, *Needle Girls*, 2009. Unique artist's book, photographs from collaborative book with Marianne Meijer, needles, pins, thorns, razor blades, nails, staples, screws, bandage, turpentine, oil paint, thread, H 10cm; W 20cm; L 17cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 14: Cheryl Penn, *Needle Girls*, 2009. Unique artist's book, photographs from collaborative book with Marianne Meijer, needles, pins, thorns, razor blades, nails, staples, screws, bandage, turpentine, oil paint, thread, H 10cm; W 20cm; L 17cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

Frost's theories that 'the hands prompt the mind using non-linguistic data' (2005:4) are supported in the research of Anne Mangen, who believes the haptic to be greatly important in one's experience of books. Mangen investigates whether the brain is engaged through the use of a person's hands in ways which play a notable role in the process of reading. Her findings suggest that through haptics the human hands and brain become a cohesive or integrated system for perception, understanding and action through a process of 'co-evolution'. As a result, what we consider as 'human intelligence' becomes just as embedded in the hand as it is in the brain (<http://e-boekenstad.nl/unbound/index.php/anna-mangen-on-the-technologies-and-haptics-of-reading/>). As a book is read, the hands prompt the mind continuously. In this process a 'learning path' is becoming fixed in the intellect. Tactile features such as the weight of a book and the thickness or texture of the paper for example, are continually in play even as a particular meaning emerges. The meaning itself is delivered and demonstrated or exemplified through the reader's

manipulation of a physical object, an artist's book in this case (<http://futureofthebook.com/storiestoc-5/haptic/>).

Johanna Drucker, on the other hand, allows that the haptic is important in locating the object in 'cultural space' but questions the relevance or over-all importance of haptics after this initial interaction. Drucker acknowledges that 'books are physical objects and our tactile experience of and with them is part of their multi-dimensional potential to affect meaning.' However, she indicates concern that too much focus on the haptic 'could tend towards a literalist conflation of the object and the experience' (2005:10). Simply put, in Drucker's view haptics should not be given more significance than it deserves as there are other important characteristics to consider in the evaluation of artists' books. In terms of my own practice, I tend to lean more towards Frost's argument. In my opinion haptics play an important role in the experience of artists' books and should not be overlooked. Touch allows us to explore the artwork in a way that would not be possible with the eye alone, simply observing does not suffice when there are textures to feel, pages to turn, and hidden images or words to find.

### **Text and Intimate Discovery:**

As previously discussed (chapter two; page 22,23) text, as it is used in artists' books, appears not to be the primary focus of many works (Hubert, Hubert 1999:182). However, as many book artists strive to break the bounds of what a conventional book is seen to be: a 'physical object that exists only, or primarily, to be the 'container' of an otherwise separable text,' the text included in artists' books takes on a new level of significance (Vogler 2000:449). According to Gamble, in an artist's book, 'all aspects of the production, distribution, and use of texts presuppose social functions and forces – functions and forces that are given representation, or inscribed, in the design of the text as a concrete, physical object' (Hamer 2012:3). Text in an artist's book performs a different function to text in a conventional book. Consequently, the inclusion or exclusion thereof is of equal importance. The words (text) chosen to be included in an artist's book have been selected carefully for maximum effect; one well-chosen word has the potential, in my opinion, to have far greater an effect on the reader than a book full of words in which one could get lost or overwhelmed. Book artists reject the accepted idea that books exist only

to contain the texts or images within them (Vogler 2000:448). This idea is challenged by book artists who use text as a tool or device with which to add emphasis and/or meaning to the whole as opposed to being a fundamental component of the book; a mere source of information contained in a rectangular cover.

When the above is taken into account, it becomes evident that the inclusion, or exclusion, of text in an artist's book is a result of careful consideration and cannot be overlooked as a part of the whole. Many book artists understand that the physical display of a word or a text creates an immediate interaction between the reader, the text, and the physical form of the book. The use of text in an artist's book is of particular importance or impact when the book is approached by a reader without an artistic background; fellow artists have an advantage in that they have likely been trained in the interpretation of a work without text as a guide. Stanley Fish states that the 'common' reader will take clues or guidance not only from the shape, size, texture or content of an artist's book but also from the text included in order to find meaning which will emerge from 'the interaction between the text, conceived of as a succession of words, and the developing response of the reader' (Hamer 2012:12).

Fish places as much emphasis on the reader as on the text when it comes to establishing meaning. He believes that the text lies not only in the book but also in the reader's experience of it and interaction with it, stating that if meaning develops in an active relationship with the reader's 'expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions,' then the role of the reader in response or reaction to the book are 'not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential' (Hamer 2012:12). He argues that in a conventional book the meaning is somewhat embedded in the text and as a result 'the reader's responsibilities are limited to the job of getting it out, a dull and undifferentiated occupation that turns both reader and text into static, boring automatons' (2012:12). The use of strategically placed words, and fonts, as well as the artist's intentional manipulations of the conventions of the book and page 'expand[s] the narrative into a spatial dimension' that is not typical of prose as it is known: margin to margin, left to right, likely divided into paragraphs. The reader's understanding of what they are reading is therefore consciously and continuously being disrupted (Paton 2010:6). In this way,



artists' books bring life to something (books and text) perhaps in some ways thought of as static or 'dead' (Hamer 2012:13).

*Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images* (Cheryl Penn and Marianne Meyer 2008), for example, takes the concept of an alphabet book (textual) and reworks it into something more conceptual. The book is set in a 'conventional' rectangular shape and laid out in order from A through to Z. Most often there is just one primary word on a page which is illustrated with painted and drawn images, and further emphasized with bits of strategically placed text. *Histrionic Alphabet* investigates the idea that all humans have animal tendencies and vice versa, given the right set of circumstances these tendencies will come to the fore. 'Anger' serves as the start to the alphabet. The image here is somewhat anthropomorphic: although the emotion 'anger' is human, the face of an angry bull pushed close to the surface of the page is what represents this emotion; when the reader looks very closely a human face almost tries to appear within the face of the bull. It is emphasized with portions of text which read: 'Look, I'm going to say something to you and you ain't gonna like it,' and 'present 'civilization'... is at this moment in some... archaic power instinct... proved beyond question.' The page 'Impulse' includes phrases like 'I can't always shake it off anymore' and 'tore at any sense of rationality... and brought the emotional demons rushing out.' Every word in this book is intended to have an impact on the reader and adds in some way to the greater story of the book.



Figure 15: Cheryl Penn, Marianne Meijer, *Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images*, 2008. Unique artist's book, pencil, oil paint, graphite, acrylic paint, printing, collage, bituseal, H 31.5cm; W 44cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 16: Cheryl Penn, Marianne Meijer, *Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images*, 2008. Unique artist's book, pencil, oil paint, graphite, acrylic paint, printing, collage, bituseal, H 31.5cm; W 44cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



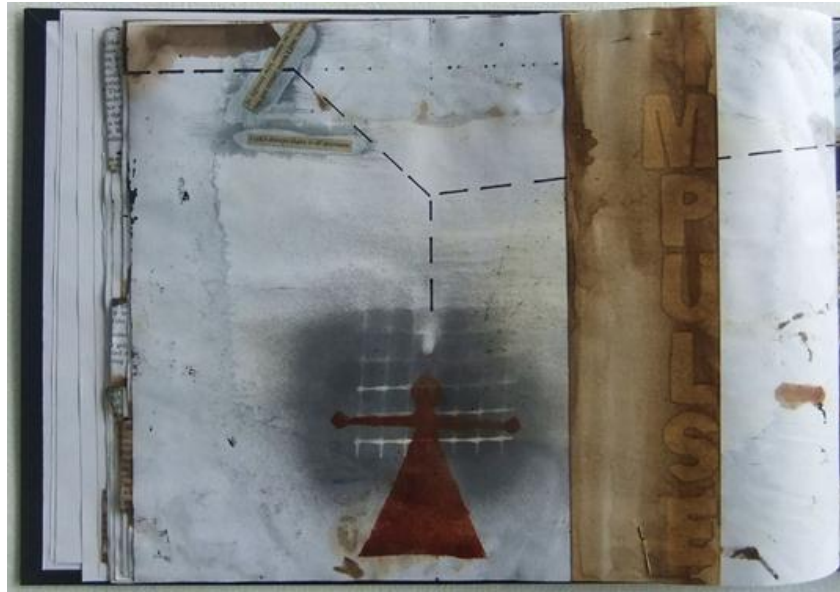


Figure 17: Cheryl Penn, Marianne Meijer, *Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images*, 2008. Unique artist's book, pencil, oil paint, graphite, acrylic paint, printing, collage, bituseal, H 31.5cm; W 44cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 18: Cheryl Penn, Marianne Meijer, *Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images*, 2008. Unique artist's book, pencil, oil paint, graphite, acrylic paint, printing, collage, bituseal, H 31.5cm; W 44cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

### **Narrative vs. Concrete systems:**

Drucker states that two of the fundamental structural elements of a book are finitude and sequence and the way in which artists communicate or apply these two features gives each artist's book its unique identity (2004:257). Systems in the artist's book are somewhat problematic as not all system 'patterns' will be immediately evident to the reader.

According to Morgan, systems that are set forth in artists' books will often develop naturally from the artistic concepts which, in turn, have evolved from a number of sources and external (images, texts, socio-political contexts) or internal influences (ideas, predetermined constructs) that the artist has come into contact with (1985:207).

Artists' books that tend more towards the visual, that are concentrated on defining or investigating the book as a structure often contain narrative systems (Morgan 1985:207). Such systems generally work in relation to a theme, for example either a literary or visual theme, and unfold in a sequence (1985:211). Artists' books containing narrative systems, for example Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's *1984/1994* (2009), will therefore have a story to tell, a theme or narrative to relate to the reader. Artists' books display narrative systems in various ways: the 'story,' made up of text, images, and materials (textures) will develop logically and should be relatively easy to follow or derive meaning from.

Although *1984/1994* is intended as a narrative depicting the violence and unrest in South Africa due to Apartheid during the time-period indicated in the title, it could perhaps be looked at as an example of both narrative and concrete systems. While there is a narrative element to it, the words and placement of text within both image and page gives it the appearance of a concrete system. The reader is aware of a theme of violence and unrest but must search for pattern and consciously connect the text and images from page to page. The narrative element carries through in the imagery and use of colour (white, blues, greys and black, reds and oranges) as well as in the choice of font. The text, however, adds another dimension to the book, a large amount of it is distorted or partially covered by image or paint, or incorporated into drawings. For example, the page '*Thought Police*' contains a drawing of a policeman with the words '*Thought Police*' imprinted where his forehead (brain) would be. Dashed lines connect these thoughts to hands, implying thoughts turning into action. In the pages that follow the reader sees the action and

violence resulting from these thoughts. The very last page contains a printed copy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the culmination of this violent era.



Figure 19: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, Cheryl Penn, 1984/1994, 2009. Unique collaborative artist's book. Mixed media on sugar paper including drawing, painting, text and sewing. H 30cm; W 21cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

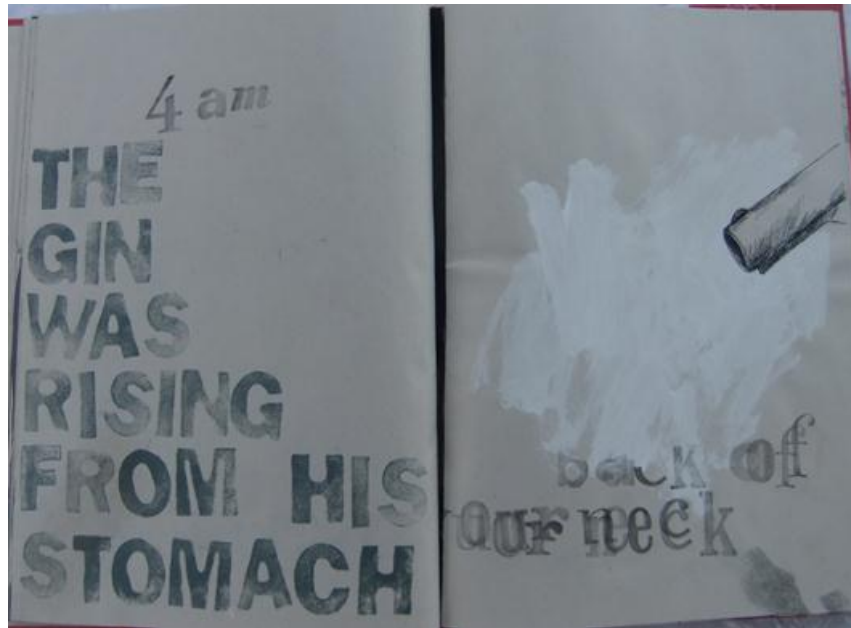


Figure 20: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, Cheryl Penn, 1984/1994, 2009. Unique collaborative artist's book. Mixed media on sugar paper including drawing, painting, text and sewing. H 30cm; W 21cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 21: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, Cheryl Penn, 1984/1994, 2009. Unique collaborative artist's book. Mixed media on sugar paper including drawing, painting, text and sewing. H 30cm; W 21cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

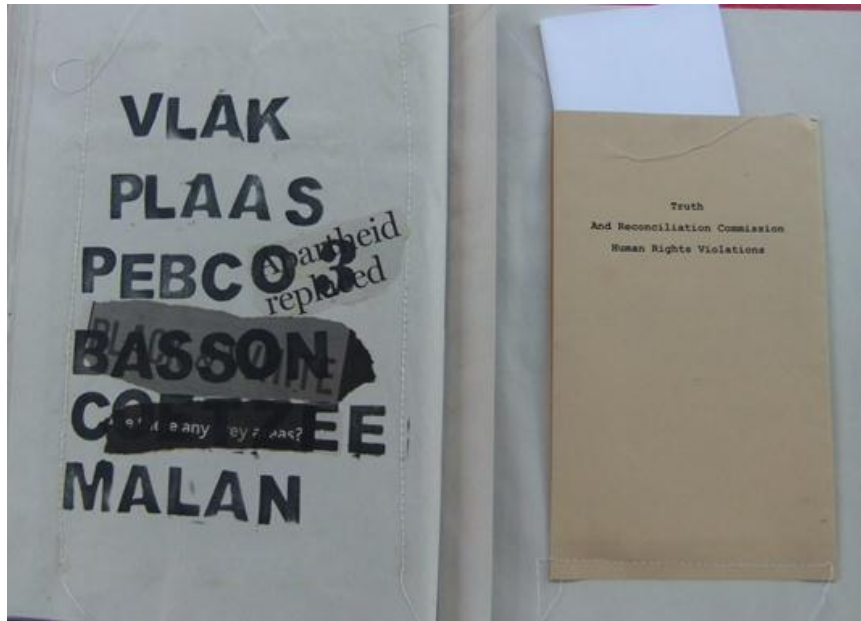


Figure 22: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, Cheryl Penn, 1984/1994, 2009. Unique collaborative artist's book. Mixed media on sugar paper including drawing, painting, text and sewing. H 30cm; W 21cm. Collection: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

Artists' books that are more conceptual and 'concerned primarily with the content of ideas' will tend towards making use of concrete systems as opposed to narrative systems (Morgan 1985:207). Where narrative systems are based on logic and sequence, concrete systems 'tend towards abstract logic and seriality'; the artist here is concerned with presenting 'an interrelationship of elements as formal design,' rather than telling a story (1985:211). Concrete systems in artists' books will be more difficult to pin down than narrative systems, images and/or text will appear to be placed at random or purely for aesthetic purposes. From my own experience, in order to remain comfortable, it has become part of human nature to look for logic and recognisable pattern. Concrete systems should therefore logically take more effort from the reader to understand than narrative systems would as the reader would be constantly searching for a linking element or pattern.

Penn's artist's book *The Daily Round* (2010) functions as a concrete system in that it has no particular narrative, although it is built around a broad theme. It is made up of two accordion books with 3 pamphlet stitch insertions, in order to be more easily accessible when on display. When both halves are opened (splayed in a semi-circle) and displayed



together they form a perfect circle, 42cm in diameter and 12cm in height, made up of a large collection of envelopes containing ‘a day in the life’ of a number of artists worldwide, and as ‘the idea is a part of the book,’ some small works, thoughts and ideas of Penn herself are also included (Penn 2013). This artist’s book essentially serves as a diary or journal, the text included is subjective and non-narrative. It is random, gathered from many sources, and partially hidden; the reader is intrigued and has to interact in order to discover the text within. Text is used in an alternative way in this book in that it is not immediately accessible and some is illegible; for example, a letter folded in an envelope with its text facing inward. For Penn, this begs the question of whether text needs to be legible in order to be considered text (Penn 2013). Hubert states that ‘this paradoxical situation whereby the audience must focus on the book as a whole rather than dwell on any of its parts, may account for the usual brevity and occasional illegibility of texts deliberately upstaged if not obscured by the structural and pictorial aspects of the work’ (1999:11). In my opinion, text remains text whether legible or illegible; the artistic or expressive choices made by the artist for aesthetic purposes do not change this.



Figure 23: Cheryl Penn, *The Daily Round*, 2010. Two collage bound books made of envelopes, and pamphlets, mixed media. H 12cm; D 42cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 24: Cheryl Penn, *The Daily Round*, 2010. Two collage bound books made of envelopes, and pamphlets, mixed media. H 12cm; D 42cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 25: Cheryl Penn, *The Daily Round*, 2010. Two collage bound books made of envelopes, and pamphlets, mixed media. H 12cm; D 42cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

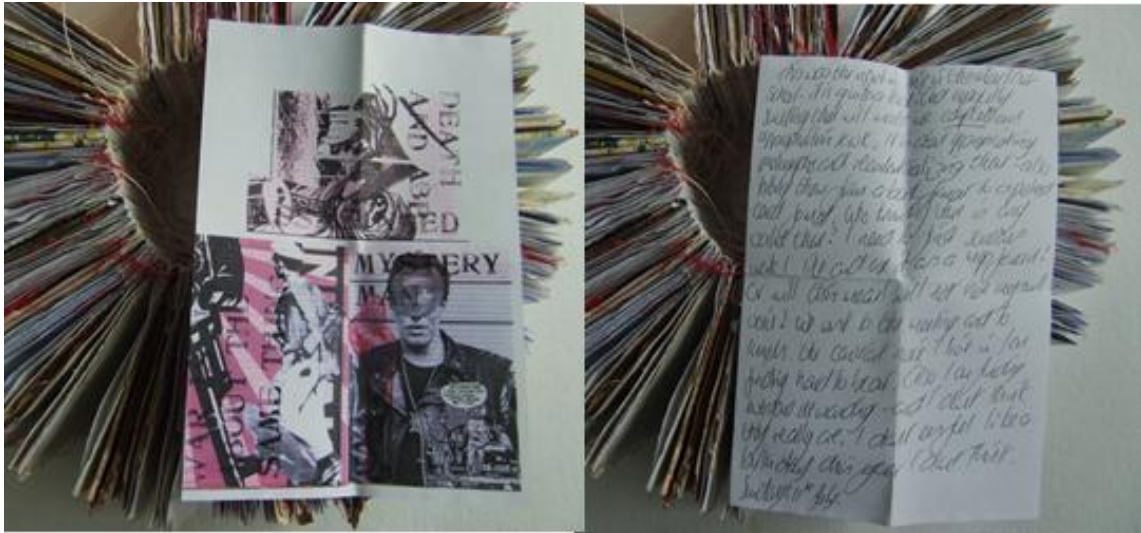


Figure 26: Cheryl Penn, *The Daily Round*, 2010. Two collage bound books made of envelopes, and pamphlets, mixed media. H 12cm; D 42cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

The choice made between narrative and concrete systems bears a lot more weight than one might initially suppose – it reveals much about the artist and his/her context, it determines to a large extent the ultimate effect of the artist's book on the reader. The manner in which information is communicated gives insight into how the artist wished to tell or emphasize their story (content). This gives the reader the power to create their own path or meaning through the work while simultaneously, 'the text's own life is reinforced through its sequential organization within the codex,' thus creating a dialogue between the physical form, the reader, and the text (Hamer 2012:4).

Narrative and concrete systems, which could also be referred to as the sequential and the non-sequential respectively, determine in some aspects the way in which space is used in an artist's book. If narrative systems (sequential) represent permanence and concrete systems (non-sequential) represent change, then the size, shape, direction and location of elements within the given space play an important role in the interpretation of the work. Based on the system chosen by the artist the relationship between the space of a book and the placement of components within it could offer a variety of interpretations as the structure of the space is emphasized in different ways (Arnheim 2004:378).



### **An Exploration of Space:**

In addition to the other elements mentioned in this chapter, artists' books communicate largely through the careful consideration of space. The space of any book is simultaneously intimate and public, mediating between private reflection and broad communication. Often, the role of space in an artist's book, particularly those created by women, can be seen as balancing the relationship between enclosure and exposure, the private and the public (Drucker 2007:14). In many artists' books, the book itself serves as a platform, a space of display (Drucker 2004:309,325).

Space in artists' books can be looked at from two basic angles: firstly, the physical space occupied by the three-dimensional book, and secondly the space inside the book occupied by the pages and content within. There are many spaces available to be used in an artist's book: the spaces on pages, between text and image, the spaces where 'conventional' margins would ordinarily have contained or restrained content; the spaces between pages, as well as the spaces between the pages and the spine of the book. For example, in Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's *Treasures and Feasts: a discourse about stars* (2009) she has enclosed 'secrets' in the spine of the book using a complex binding technique in which the front and back covers are hinged on a rod and may be separated in order to view the 'secrets.' The book is made up of a series of concertinas sewn into each other: the front two layers are sewn into the peaks and the concertina forming the spine is sewn into the valleys with a simple three-hole pamphlet stitch, allowing for the hidden elements. Lippard describes every page in an artist's book as 'a very specific space in a very specific context' and one that must be 'as carefully considered as the surface of a canvas and the space in which it's exhibited' (1985:53). The presentation of an artist's book is by no means ordinary, every space a page provides is used as a valuable part of the composition and meaning of the work (Drucker 2004:358); the page therefore becomes an active space and the size and shape thereof become significant variables in the experience of the space (McCaffery 2000:22).

*Treasures and Feasts* was created as part of a project at the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, entitled *Contemporary Reflections: New Art from Old*. Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's book was inspired by a Hendrik Stroebe vase *Pleasures and Treasures* (c. 1993), then on display at the Tatham. Liebenberg-Barkhuizen was immediately drawn to

the parallels between the vase and an artist's book: both objects have sculptural qualities without being classified as sculptures; the vase itself is made up of two parts which open, reminiscent of a book; and the surface of the vase is covered in multi-cultural images and text, inviting the audience to 'read' the vase. The use of the Muslim star on the back of the vase caught Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's particular attention. This led to her consideration of other stars – the Jewish star of David, the morning star, the Bethlehem star, the fact that the meaning of her name is 'star,' and ultimately a bookbinding structure called a 'star-book' (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2013). Liebenberg-Barkhuizen chose to use the format of a 'star-book' for a number of reasons: 'the first is a thematic one, namely that of the star, which links the book with the image on the vase. The second one is physical: it takes time to walk around the vase to see all aspects of it as it takes time to read a book' (<http://www.tatham.org.za/cr09-liebenberg.html>).

This book makes use of space in a number of ways. Closed, it appears rectangular and does not impose on the readers space; however it opens as a multi-layered star-book and also spreads out as a concertina which is the only way that the reader sees the writing 'hidden' in the spine. The multi-cultural, layered imagery on the Stroebel vase, as well as its title prompted Liebenberg-Barkhuizen to consider the idea of feasts, particularly in the Christian faith (a faith which has no cultural boundaries). Interestingly, the cover is much larger than the star-book within. The space above the star-book is filled with trellis like twirling cut-outs representing the decorative wrought iron on the original vase, while a cut-out pattern of the thorny crown worn by Christ on the cross runs continuously along the bottom of all the pages in the book, illustrating the continuation of a Christian theme across many cultures.

Although the pages throughout the book are constructed of three layers, each double page is unique in its use of space. In the first page, for example, the reader looks into the night sky through a semi-circular window to see a bright yellow star intersected by a compass pointing eastward. The star is set on a layer of thin blue organza which floats over the bottom layer of blue paper. In the third double page the reader looks at a scene reminiscent of the last supper through an eastern inspired window. The table is set behind the first layer and in turn has a layer behind it in which its own space is created through the inclusion of pillars and floor-tiles. The fifth page is slightly different in that instead of layers receding into the book Liebenberg-Barkhuizen has included a pop-out decorative cross set on a

backing of a Greek translation of Revelation 3.20, the English translation of the scripture can be found in the spine of the book; it reads: ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me’ (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation3:20&version=ESV>).



Figure 27: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *Treasures and Feasts: a Discourse About Stars*, date. Unique artist's book, fibre art, paper, beads. Closed book: H 33cm; W 16,5cm. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery. Photograph <http://www.tatham.org.za/cr09-liebenberg.html> accessed by Phillipa Haskins, 15.06.2013.



Figure 28: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *Treasures and Feasts: a Discourse About Stars*, date. Unique artist's book, fibre art, paper, beads. Closed book: H 33cm; W 16,5cm. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

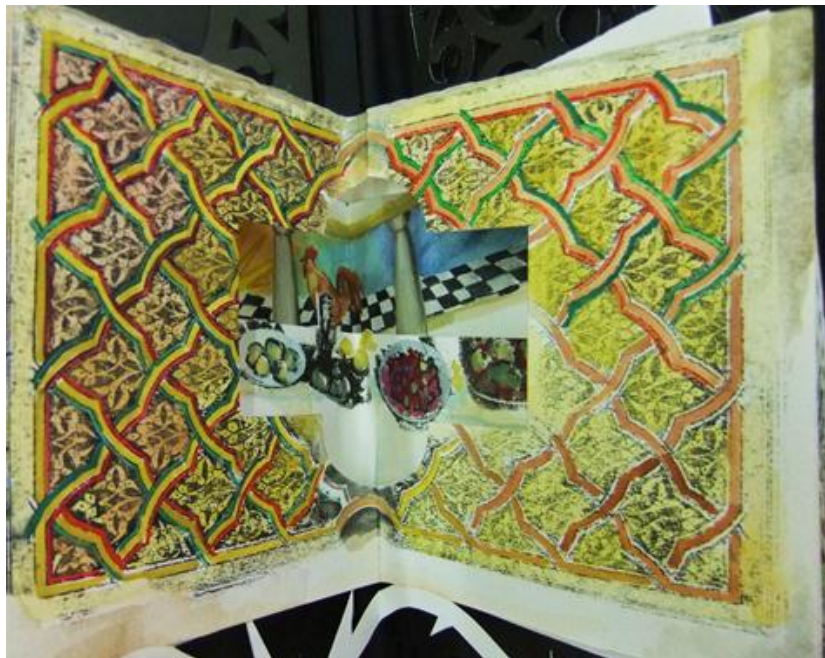


Figure 29: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *Treasures and Feasts: a Discourse About Stars*, date. Unique artist's book, fibre art, paper, beads. Closed book: H 33cm; W 16,5cm. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013



Figure 30: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *Treasures and Feasts: a Discourse About Stars*, date. Unique artist's book, fibre art, paper, beads. Closed book: H 33cm; W 16,5cm. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.



Figure 31: Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *Treasures and Feasts: a Discourse About Stars*, date. Unique artist's book, fibre art, paper, beads. Closed book: H 33cm; W 16,5cm. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery. Photographs by Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, 2009.

An interesting concept put forth by Joanna Hamer is that ‘the book is in fact a cardboard box which, when opened, contains a series of discrete objects rattling around in the space inside’ (2012:13). Space ‘enables the packaging of total environments – the total engagement of the senses – where sights, smells, sounds, feelings are engineered, refined... and deployed for maximum effect’ (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 2003:49). This is particularly true in relation to artists’ books; the book as an object provides the ideal location in which to package a ‘total environment.’ Space, therefore, plays an important role in the artist’s book functioning as a transvironment.

As noted by Higgins, the space of any artist’s book, even when the artist has not self-consciously shaped it or decorated it, is a very real, even tactile, part of the relationship between the reader and the book and their experience of its contents (1996:104). An idea that is inherent to the transvironmental book is that the reader will be ‘surrounded’ once inside; ‘what we want in a transvironment is to allow this getting lost while supplying a guiding principle that cannot be overly concretized... when the root metaphor of the book changes, the physiognomy – the posture and attitude – of the reader also changes.’ So the book is not only read, but ‘lived in’ (Quasha 1996:90-91).

### **Shape and the Artist’s Book:**

As artists’ books are not rigid, immobile works of art but are almost continuously in motion, the shape of the book is in an almost constant state of fluctuation. Subsequently, the shape of an artists’ book could be considered on a number of levels: when open, when closed, and when in motion or transition. Due to the mobile and three dimensional nature of artists’ books, their shape is more often than not irregular or indefinite. The shape of an artist’s book could be looked at as a physical shape that develops progressively as the ‘shape’ of the works meaning or message emerges simultaneously for the reader. Fish would argue that rather than looking at the ‘static’ shape of a page one should focus on the ‘developing shape of... actualization,’ the ‘shape’ of the interaction between the artist’s creation and the reader’s interpretation (Hamer 2012:9).

Arnheim asserts that ‘although the visual shape of an object is largely determined by its outer boundaries, the boundaries cannot be said to *be* the shape’ (2004:92). This is



particularly true of artists' books: because of the three-dimensional mobility of artists' books it becomes necessary to consider the form of the works over and above, or in conjunction with, their shape. Book artists use form in ways which often go beyond the 'practical function' of a book by exploiting elements found in their shape such as roundness or rectangularity, strength or fragility, harmony or discordance (2004:97). Penn's *Transgressing the Page* (2009) is the ideal example of this. The cover of this book is made of a canvas-like fabric, and this soft cover in fact doubles as the spine of the book. When closed this book is a rectangle with irregular sides (as each page is irregular), and when fully open it forms a circle or ring-like structure. According to Penn, the soft cover-spine illustrates the fact that nothing in life is static, everything changes and nothing lasts; this is embodied in Penn's work (Penn 2013).

Book artists make use of shape and form in various ways and in close conjunction with the other features (elements) of the book. In a successful artist's book both the shape and the content should become the function of the same objective (Durante 2005:34). Some artist's books make use of a conventional book and page shape, for example: rectangular. Others will tend towards experimenting with unconventional book shapes, and then further than that some artists will shape the entire book while others will shape individual pages within the book. In such books every page is viewed as an individualised element of a structure, the book, in which it has a specific function to fulfil, and will be customized accordingly (Carrión 1985:33).

*Transgressing the Page* has changed shape a number of times and no longer exists in its original form. Originally, it was made up of pages from every book Penn could find. It began with the idea of transgression. The process of taking books out of their original space or context begins this transgression of the page, changing pages in order to make a new work and juxtaposing information continues this. The book itself was returned to Penn after its security was compromised while on exhibition which led to its final 'transgression'; Penn decided to deconstruct the book and re-use its elements in the creation of new works (for example: *Thoughts Cut Up*, 2009).



Figure 32: Cheryl Penn, *Transgressing the Page*, 2009. Unique artist's book, single pamphlet stitch binding, soft spine/cover, re-worked images, text, various book/document/journal/magazine pages, dress patterns, thread, H 15cm; W 90cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph [http://cherylpennartistsbooks.com/htm/pic\\_28\\_1.htm](http://cherylpennartistsbooks.com/htm/pic_28_1.htm) accessed by Phillipa Haskins, 13.06.2013.



Figure 33: Cheryl Penn, *Transgressing the Page*, 2009. Unique artist's book, single pamphlet stitch binding, soft spine/cover, re-worked images, text, various book/document/journal/magazine pages, dress patterns, thread, H 15cm; W 90cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph [http://cherylpennartistsbooks.com/htm/pic\\_28\\_2.htm](http://cherylpennartistsbooks.com/htm/pic_28_2.htm) accessed by Phillipa Haskins, 13.06.2013.





Figure 34: Cheryl Penn, *Thoughts Cut Up*, 2013. Unique artist's book, pamphlet stitch binding, paper, printing, cotton, pages from *Transgressing the Page*, H 15cm; W 10.5cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

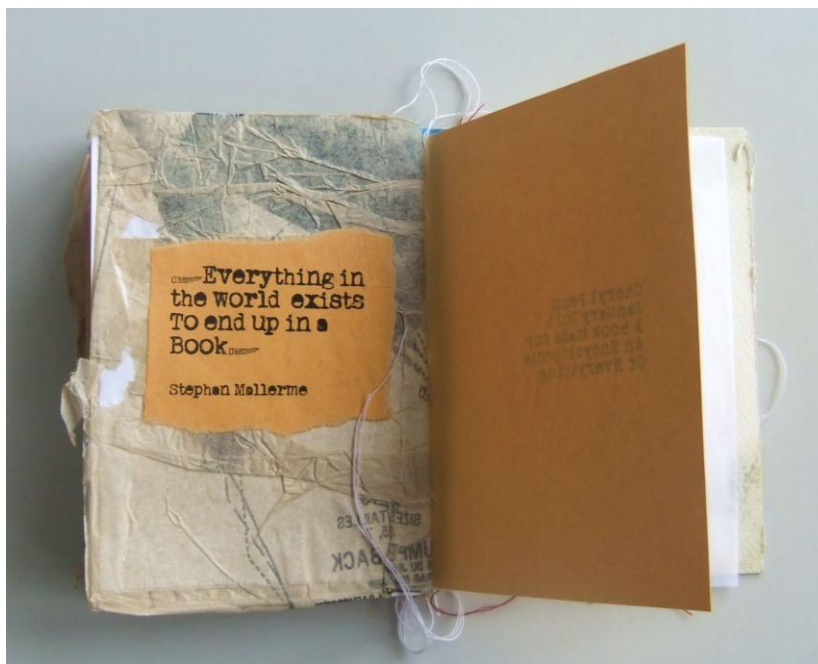


Figure 35: Cheryl Penn, *Thoughts Cut Up*, 2013. Unique artist's book, pamphlet stitch binding, paper, printing, cotton, pages from *Transgressing the Page*, H 15cm; W 10.5cm. Collection: Cheryl Penn. Photograph by Phillipa Haskins, 2013.

In relation to both space and shape, balance is an intriguing element to consider when looking at artists' books. Arnheim describes balance as an 'interplay of directed tensions' which act as 'psychological forces' (2004:11), here he is referring to the invisible lines of tension on a page. However, I would like to consider whether these 'tensions' could be reconsidered as text, image, colour, texture or materials, even space and shape. All of these elements in an artist's book would need to be carefully considered in order for balance (pleasing aesthetics) to be acquired. Arnheim emphasizes that 'visually as well as physically, balance is the state of distribution in which all action has come to a standstill.' A balanced composition is one in which every factor (for example: shape) is placed in such a way that 'no change seems possible' and therefore becomes a 'necessary' part of the whole. A composition that is unbalanced 'looks accidental, transitory and therefore invalid. Its elements show a tendency to change place or shape in order to reach a state that better accords with the total structure' (2004:20).

Given the above, the question emerges whether it is possible for there to be balance in works that are in constant motion. Where space and shape are continuously in flux, balance, both for the artist and the reader, takes on a rather ambiguous role and can become difficult to get a handle on. Movement (motion), therefore, plays a role not only in the shape and space of an artist's book but also largely in the balance of the work. Movement is a key element in the level of interaction or experience between the reader and the artist's book; the reader must constantly be reacting to changing shapes and spaces, searching for balance. In an artist's book, according to Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, balance is often lost and movement impeded due to simple mechanical errors in binding and book structure (Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2013). Arnheim suggests that a composition, an artist's book for the purposes of this dissertation, should have a 'comprehensive dynamic' in which motion will only succeed when it is a carefully considered part of the whole (2004:432).

In conclusion, part of the compelling nature of artists' books is the manner in which they draw attention to the 'specific character of a book's identity while they embody the expressive complexity of the book as a communicative form.' The 'infinite space of the page' counters the 'sense of limit which an edge, binding, and spine provide.' The artist's book therefore becomes 'capable of drawing the reader inward in an endlessly expanding experience of sensation and association' (Drucker 2004:359).

The works included in this chapter have illustrated the diversity and complexity of artists' books and the elements or features that must be considered in their design and creation. From form and structure to subject matter and materials, all of the features exemplified in this chapter contribute in an equal measure to the ultimate reading experience, require intimate engagement, and for the reader to approach the book with an open mind. Chapter four will serve as the conclusion to this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Concluding Chapter**

This dissertation set out to investigate the characteristics of the artist's book which affect the readability and intimate experience of such books. My inquiry has led me to determine that the characteristics, or features, selected for discussion in this dissertation are among those that should be carefully considered by book artists in order for the artist's book to have a successful effect on its reader. Hamer states that a book is not like a transparent sheet of glass: 'Light bends around books – the world is heavier in eddies surrounding them,' books are filled with 'worlds that can only exist when populated by a reader.' She sustains that the pages and their movement, the weight of the cover, the shadows made by the text through the page, the hidden spaces, and the previous lives of the materials can often be more significant than the actual words contained within the book (2012:21). The relation between the holistic nature of artists' books and their effect on the reader has been the core focus of this dissertation.

The natural place to begin in the investigation into the experience of an artist's book is in situating the book arts, specifically artists' books, within the art world. To distinguish whether the audience should be classed as 'viewer' or 'reader' it is necessary to conclude where the artists' book sits on the scale between book and art. In an interview with Penn, Jeanette Gilks states that 'book' is a broad term which suggests 'identical multiples and mass communication... 'Artist's book' on the other hand conjures up the feel of extraordinary, of singularity... you are drawn into the artist's space so as to breathe his air' (Penn 2009:42). As my research suggests, the inclusion of text and the interaction between the audience and the work lends more towards it being 'read' than 'viewed.' The field of artists' books is such a broad and varying domain that this is no simple task; however, my research has led me to conclude that the ideal artist's book should be placed somewhere near the middle, having a relatively equal measure of both book and art. This is supported by the writings of Sowden and Bodman, Drucker, and Bright, as well as through my consideration of selected works by Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen.

Chapter two dealt largely with the classification of the artists' book. It was concluded that the book arts, artists' books specifically, can be situated quite comfortably in the arena of postmodernism for a number of reasons. Firstly, in a similar way to postmodernism in general an artist's book compels the reader to question their approach towards both book

and art. This is brought about through both the conjunction and juxtaposition of two very different disciplines (literature and the arts), as well as through hybridisation and the eclectic use of materials and subject matter. Secondly, the artists' book could be seen to function as an installation; a genre that developed and gained popularity under postmodernism. The artists' book is essentially a display space containing what could be seen as an entire exhibition, it is both sculptural and interactive, often imposing on the reader's space whilst also demanding a level of physical interaction in order to be experienced in its entirety. Thirdly, it was concluded that the artists' book may even be considered a transvirement – an unexpected environment which draws the reader inward and compels them to see transactional possibilities, between reader and book and between viewer and artwork, which were perhaps not evident to them before.

The challenge in defining something such as an artist's book is the intensely personal or intimate encounter that each reader will have with a specific work. Every person will approach the work with their own ideas and hermeneutic, and the effect that the book has on this hermeneutic cannot necessarily be generalized. Through writing this dissertation I have questioned the need, the value even, for the debate behind defining or classifying the book arts. My conclusion is that this is a genre which has no clear boundaries and no set rules, and this can be somewhat unsettling for people both inside and outside the art world. Although this particular question or debate is not as prevalent in critical discourse now as it was ten years ago, there is still no concrete answer to the question: 'what is an artist's book?' further than that it is a book made by an artist. Hamer eloquently states that

the artist's book is a category of creative output that enjoys the difficulty of its characterization. There is no formula or description that can encompass all artist's books: one might say that all works in this category contain words, or paper, or images, but these would not hold true for all things that consider themselves artist's books. The one characterization that I hold to be true about all artists' books is that they deal with the thin and moveable lines between book and art, between author and artist, and between form and content. They are a form that enjoys walking the narrow bridges, pushing our ideas of what is static and interconnected (Hamer 2012:6).

In relation to the above statement, it is important that artists' books are viewed as an open rather than a closed concept. As discussed in chapter two, open concepts allow the reader or viewer to include what they feel appropriate under a particular

banner (Warburton 2003:72). This is key, in my opinion, to the ‘classification’ of the book arts, artists’ books specifically, as it opens the door to an environment of intimate engagement between the reader and the work.

Chapter three investigates features which should be considered by the artist in order to create a successful artist’s book experience. In the selection of these features I have drawn on the writings of Frost, Drucker, Hubert and Hubert, Clay, and Hamer, as well as on the creative work of Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen. Those emphasized are intimacy, haptics, text, narrative and concrete systems, space, and shape. In addition, my research suggests that balance is an important component in the combination of these elements; i.e. every element should be placed in such a way that the composition, however complex, appears complete and that no change appears possible. All elements should fit together in such a way as to produce ‘a unified, coherent statement’ (Prince 2008:3).

The intimate experience of an artists’ book can be brought about by a number of factors, many imposed on the reader by the artist. Establishing intimacy through the use of novelty devices is a tool that many book artists make use of. Largely influenced by children’s books, novelty devices serve two main purposes in the artists’ book; to attract the attention of the adult reader through aesthetic expression by emphasizing certain aspects of the books content, as well as to compel the reader to redefine their learned or habitual approach to reading. This causes the reader to consciously, perhaps even sub-consciously, interact with the content of the artists’ book often leading to the retrieval of memories or the evoking of certain emotions. It is important to note that, although prompted by the artist, the reader has as much a part to play in intimate experience as the artist themselves. The reader must approach the book arts with an open mind. Liebenberg-Barkhuizen’s *21<sup>st</sup> February*, discussed in chapter three is a prime example of such a work. As a clearly personal and perhaps sentimental work for the artist, the reader (I speak for myself) cannot help but be moved emotionally on some level by the content of the book.

Haptics is perhaps the most obvious, and arguably one of the most important elements of an artist’s book to consider in relation to intimate experience. In the haptic debate between Drucker and Frost two extreme opinions become evident: Drucker feels that too much emphasis on the haptic has little value (2005:10), while Frost argues that the mind is prompted by the hand and haptics are therefore of the utmost importance (2005:4).

Although in my opinion I lean more towards Frost's arguments, a way in which this dissertation attempts to balance this debate is by considering haptics in terms of medium and texture. It is clear that an artist's book cannot be experienced fully without touch, as the haptic sets any transactional possibilities between the reader and the work in motion; touch mediates the experience. It is perhaps for this reason that artists' books make use of such a vast array of materials and textures, as illustrated in Penn's *Needle Girls*. Texture, although a medium on its own cannot be seen as a separate entity when considering an artist's book; materials are chosen carefully by the artist and add to the overall message of the work. For example: the 'blood-stained' bandage in *Needle Girls* is perhaps an unusual choice of material when considered on its own, but when looked at in conjunction with the content or message of the entire book it is very fitting. The artist in this case essentially manipulates the reader through the haptic.

As text is not often used in large quantities in artists' books, both the display and choice of words becomes essential to the effectiveness of the work. Book artist's often use text as a tool through which to break away from the social 'functions and forces' that are, according to Gamble, often attached to conventional books (Hamer 2012:3). The physical display of text therefore becomes significant in the impact of an artist's book. In many cases, as illustrated by *Histrionic Alphabet and other arbitrary images*, the text becomes incorporated into the images and shapes within the artist's book sometimes rendering it illegible. In this case certain aspects of the text are clear while the bulk is covered by the images within the book. The reader is expected to interact with the book in order to make sense of the text, or lack of text; the reader must search for meaning and often add their own 'text' (even subconsciously) where there is none.

The search for meaning or pattern in both text and image is often extended through the use of narrative or concrete systems. According to Drucker, finitude and sequence are two of the fundamental elements of a book (2004:257); in artists' books, however, a logical sequence or pattern is not always immediately evident. Narrative systems are by nature logical, concrete systems abstract. In the artist's book this distinction cannot always be easily made as these works are designed to be aesthetically attractive while simultaneously getting a message across. *1984/1994* for example, makes use of bold images and bold, but minimal, text. This allows the reader to come to an individual conclusion, to create their own meaning based on their own hermeneutic or set of experiences and is thus an

important part of intimate experience. The overall success of this depends to some extent on the use of space within the artist's book.

Space plays an interesting role in artists' books, particularly those made by Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Penn. In my experience, women tend towards being sentimental by nature, and as book artists women often seem to seek for the balance between the public and the private by using hidden spaces or hiding things in spaces (Drucker 2007:14). Liebenberg-Barkhuizen exemplifies this in the use of space in her books, as seen in *Treasures and Feasts: a discourse about stars*. Space in this artist's book was looked at in two primary areas: the physical or three dimensional space occupied by the book (relating to shape), and the space within the book. In an artist's book, more than an ordinary book, space becomes valuable and must be considered in connection with the content or message of the book. As Lippard states, every page becomes a specific space in a specific context which means that artists must consider every available area within the book a part of the composition and the ultimate effectiveness of communication (1985:53). It can be concluded that the space of the book allows for the packaging of a total environment and experience. When the reader must re-evaluate the spaces within a book, the way in which they approach the book will change; facilitating an experience which becomes both intimate and interactive.

Like the space of an artist's book, the shape is continuously changing as the book is in almost continuous motion. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, it is therefore difficult to succinctly define the shape of such books and becomes necessary to consider form over and above shape. The outer boundaries of the book itself cannot be said to be the actual shape of the artist's book in many cases (Arnheim 2004:92) as pages are often individually or irregularly shaped. As noted, Penn's *Transgressing the Page* illustrates the flexibility or unpredictability of shape in an artist's book in a number of ways. Firstly, this book had no solid spine (the spine doubled as the cover) and could therefore have no set shape; and secondly, this book no longer exists in its original form but has been broken up to become part of a number of other works.

It is important to acknowledge that image, although an essential part of an artist's book was not discussed as an entity on its own but was included under each of the other sections to some extent.



The works investigated in this dissertation clearly illustrate the diversity of the field of artists' books. Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen were deliberately chosen as two artists who approach the book arts with very different views. Penn explores intimate experience and haptics through her prolific creation of artist's books and the immediacy between idea (conception) and product (artwork). Her books are part of an unending process of creation, often being 'recycled' into new pieces. Liebenberg-Barkhuizen on the other hand explores the ideas of intimacy and experience through sentimentality, personal memories, and careful consideration of each element of the book combined with careful binding. Each book once finished is treasured and treated as valuable (from interviews with Penn, Liebenberg-Barkhuizen 2013). It was not the intention of this dissertation to discuss the artists themselves in detail but rather to look at their works as examples relating to specific features of artists' books affecting intimate experience.

This research has been valuable to me in that it has both fed into and been born out of my own practice and the works I have created in studio. Although my collection of work consists largely of book objects rather than artists' books, the importance of the book functioning as a platform (an exhibition space) as well as the reader's approach to it and its content are of the utmost importance. Furthermore, this research may be of assistance to other book art practitioners in the Centre for Visual Art particularly. There appears to be a growing interest in the exploration of this diverse medium in recent years; some of the third year class this year for example has been including children's books and paper cut-outs in their studio work.

Future research in South Africa could include a cataloguing of the works of South African book artists; there is very little information available in this area short of speaking to each artist personally which provides a great opportunity in itself. The Ginsberg collection of artists' books would be an ideal place to begin this research. In addition to this, Cheryl Penn has an extensive collection of her own, and other, finished and unfinished works which could be documented.

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## **Glossary:**

<b>Artisan:</b>	refers to a worker or artist specialized in a skilled trade, most often involving the hand-made or hand-crafted.
<b>Artist's book:</b>	any book made by an artist.
<b>Book object:</b>	a sculptural form created from a book or pieces of a book.
<b>Book:</b>	any selection of pages, texts, images, or cards bound together (for example either by sewing, gluing or stapling).
<b>Fine press:</b>	a small, often privately owned publisher, creating and printing high quality and limited edition books. Not limited to artists' books.
<b>Haptics:</b>	the technology of touch.
<b>Hermeneutics:</b>	a study of the interpretations and meanings of artworks shifting the focus off of the artist's intentions and allowing for the acceptance of a variety of individual responses and perspectives based on the socio-political, historical and geographical context of the particular audience.
<b>Holistic:</b>	referring to something of which every part is interconnected and relating to the whole.
<b>Installation art:</b>	multi-dimensional artworks not confined to sculptural works, eclectic in both media and materials. Installations are often large-scale and site-specific, and generally considered to be interactive.
<b>Meta-criticism:</b>	a criticism of criticism, in which the underlying principles of critical interpretation and discourse are investigated or examined.
<b>Multiple:</b>	any book printed in an edition of more than two.
<b>Postmodernism:</b>	a movement in art, architecture, and criticism in the late 20 <sup>th</sup> century which was a departure from modernism; characterized by the eclectic use of artistic styles and media, and the questioning of accepted theories.
<b>Ready-mades:</b>	referring to found objects mounted, framed, or placed in an alternative environment and proclaimed to be works of art.
<b>Transvironment:</b>	an environment or construct that creates an opportunity for a fundamental alteration in perception and interpretation of the surrounding world. Transvironmental art potentially alters the perceptual means by which the viewer recognizes any transactional possibilities that are available to them.
<b>Zine:</b>	a cheaply made and mass produced magazine, generally in black and white, bound with staples and cheaply priced.

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