Books Made by Artists

Kevin Connannon

Since the early 1960s the artist's book has proliferated as one of the new medium among many which offers both artists and public greater accessibility to each other. Artists' books, which range from cheaply printed aphorisms and zines to unique hand-worked objects, date back to the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, a tradition greatly affected by the introduction of the printing press.

Boston book artist Frances Hamilton began making books while traveling through Europe in 1966. While her original intention was to use the book as a portable studio, she soon found her interest in illuminated manuscript and Persian miniatures manifesting itself in her books.

What exactly is an artist's book? Well, if it was made by an artist, it is intended as a work of art unto itself, and not just the form of a book, there you have it. Within this broadly defined category, however, specific works may contain drawings (reproduced or original), photographs, and/or text. This still, however, doesn't cover everything by any means.

One notable exception which wonderfully illustrates this problem is Bruce Nauman's Clearksy (1969). Clearksy is composed of eight pages of blue paper in various shades (the cloudless heavens). By organizing the pages and titling them, Nauman created a work which is at once conceptual and representational, yet involves no drawing, no photographs, and no text other than the title. Artists' books, like any other medium, often reflect the social climate of their times. In the late 1950s, during the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop, the clubs and bars of Lower Manhattan attracted kindred souls in poets and painters. These interactions often resulted in works of art which led directly off each other. Dealer Tibor de Nagy became very active at this time, publishing pamphlets like books which were collaborations between poets and painters, a very revolutionary concept, but something of surprising Renaissance nonetheless.

One such book, A City Winter, included poems by Frank O'Hara and reproductions of drawings by Larry Rivers as it did every year. During the time of the New York School, both artists were known for their anti-commercial stance and for their work in the same name written by Melamet, best known as a playwright. Neither of these book features seemed to have a problem with the same name.

While Applebrook's books serve to get her work out to a lot of people, she considers them works of art independent of the paintings which they reproduce. She has recently stopped producing books because of prohibitive costs. Contrary to popular belief, a book is often more expensive to produce than a single, unique work of art such as a painting.

Unique works of art, however, have also taken the form of books. Anselm Kiefer constructed his Johan- nisnacht II (1981) of painted black and white photographs pasted to sheets of cardboard bound together in book format. The pages are meant to be "read" (again, the only text is the title) as a book, and make sense only within such a context. By altering a series of photographs with representational and gestural markings, Kiefer successfully seduces the reader into a misreading of the text (book). The fraud is revealed at the end of the story, which betrays the notion of the photograph as a true document, suggesting the equal capacities of both media for illusion. What first appears as a surrepti- tiously documentary war, complete with camouflaged tanks, is actually a backyard set-up with a toy plastic tank, further manipulated with paint. Kiefer's book refers to and questions the very processes and media of art while operating as an art object itself.

Sometimes artists' books refer to and add dimension to specific works of art. Marcel Duchamp's The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even (The Green Box) is reproduction of Duchamp's notes for his seminal piece of the same name (originally known as The Large Glass). Here, the book is a real sketchbook, but not in the traditional sense. While sketches and working drawings for the original unique object are included, the primary information is the text which illustrates the exact levels of understanding the work. By subverting criticism in this way, Duchamp paved the way for conceptual art, in which information alone constitutes many works.

In the realm of pure texts by artists, manifestos are an obvious place to begin. In this way, it is clearly the democratic reproducibility of the press which determines the form. Manifestos are designed to attract maximum attention to the art and theory of individual artists and groups of artists. The Italian Futurists were perhaps the greatest exploiters of this form. Most of their major contributions to the history of art were first issued as manifestos. And not surprisingly, their leader was not a painter but a poet.

More recently, artist Joseph Beuys has used the manifesto format, focusing often on subjects outside the traditional realm of the arts. Beuys's numerous manifestos deal with politics and education as often as they deal with art. Nonetheless, Beuys sees every work he produces as sharing equal status as art.

Other local artists who make books include Janet Zweig and Laura Blacklow. Zweig's current project is titled Heinz and Judy. Heinz and Judy is somewhat of a cross between the classic Punch and Judy and a standard children's morality test story about Heinz and his dying wife. The dilemmas which Heinz faces are designed to test children's moral development, and in the context of the more frivolous Punch and Judy, Zweig raises questions of her own about popular media. Superimposed over the collage story are scenes from a shadow play which adds yet another element to the text. Zweig's books are offset printed and professionally bound.

Laura Blacklow's handmade books incorporate collage, text, and various photographic processes. While her works have generally been one of a kind, she editions Xerox blow-ups of certain pages. Her current project on surviving deals with her experiences following the death of her mother. Blacklow hopes to produce a large edition of this work to be distributed to hospices and nursing homes for the benefit of others who face similar losses. Blacklow feels that this type of material is a necessary complement to the standard clinical texts which are occasionally provided, she is currently seeking funds.

Finally, there are now a number of books by artists which are both cheap and widely available. Laura Anderson has documented her ongoing performance of United States (I-IV) with a substantial new book of the same title. With notes, photographs, and drawings, United States presents the sensorially-overload multimedia event as a comprehensive plan available to those cheated by the limitations of time and place which the medium of performance imposes. Also of note is Eleanor Antin's Being Antin which documents her other life as Eleanor Antinova, the black ballerina with Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. In Being Antinova, the artist describes her performance from the artist's (not the ballerina's) point of view. Also included are a series of faked photographs of the ballerina in her great roles. While a few of these books are available locally, New York's Printed Matter in Tribeca carries more than you could imagine. And if looking is all you have in mind, Franklin Furnace (also in New York) is the place to go.

Kevin Connannon is a freelance writer and curator. His most recent curatorial effort is On the Wall—On the Air. Artists Make Noise. December 14-January 27 at Hayden Corridor Gallery.