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## REVIEWS & PRESS

Jerome Rothenberg and David Guss, eds. *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*. Granary Books, 1996.

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**Beam, Jeffrey. "Three Books about Books." *Oyster Boy Review* 14 (Winter 2001): 52.**

Jerome Rothenberg's always original and thought-provoking work within language and poetics has established ethnopoetics as a discipline encouraging expanded definitions of cultural artifacts. In these two books, he and his co-editors explore the meaning of "the book," envisioning a primal book written "out there" from which all manifestations of language spring. Proposing a book as a metaphor for imagining opens its interpretation to something more than a vessel for words; it becomes a communal theater of experience and instrument for action, facilitating invention and belief, communication and ritual, revealing itself as a spiritual conduit for human becoming. In *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*, essays on theater, the *Torah*, the Mayan *Popul Vuh*, and tribal sounds, intersect with interviews, photographs, and works by writers such as Edmond Jabès, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Eluard, performance artist Alison Knowles, and book artist Karl Young.

This intersection between visual, oral, and published language constitutes the basis for a vividly entertaining and instructive exploration of literature, aesthetics, and books as philosophical, notational, and revelatory instruments which cannot be replaced by other modes, even newer high tech ones. Dick Higgins states "The book is, then, a container of provocation. We open it and are provoked to match our horizons with those implicated by the text."

*A Book of the Book* extends and amplifies *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*. Here Stephen Clay, publisher of Granary Books, joins Rothenberg and segues his experience as bookmaker into Rothenberg's language explorations. Subtitled "Some Works & Projections about the Book & Writing" it succeeds in manifesting materially the spiritual pattern imagined in the previous work. It also evaluates positively the value and necessity of maintaining actual books in the new continuum redefined by virtual ones.

*A Book of the Book* amply offers essays on literary notation in various cultures, printing as an art, Modernist and Post-Modernist literary movements, the book as religious object, Emily Dickinson, Blake, Mallarmé, Art Brut, shaman Maria Sabina, tribal songs and visual poems, Chinese calligraphy and other Asian aesthetic principles, bookmaker Adolf Wolfi, Jewish mysticism, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and even novelty books (including children's pop-up books). Alongside appear generous excerpts from writers and visual and book artists such as Anne Waldman, Gertrude Stein, Edmund Jabès, Max Ernst, Keith Smith, Antonin Artaud, Whitman, Blake, Tom Phillips, Jess Collins, and others. A special treat is a gatefold of a

poem by Blaise Cendrars illustrated by Sonia Delaunay.

Charles Bernstein concludes his essay which closes the volume thusly: "Poetry's social function in our time is to bring language ear to ear with its temporality, physicality, dynamism: its evanescence, not its fixed character; its fluidity, not its authority; its structures, not its storage capacity; its concreteness and particularity, not its abstract logicity and clarity."

Bernstein brilliantly summarizes Clay and Rothenberg's intent. Well organized, wide-ranging across time and space, *A Book of the Book* is an engaging read for anyone interested in the aesthetic, literary, historical, technical, and anthropological development and meaning of the book. It would make a fine textbook for a class on book arts or the evolution of the book. Scholarly, yet accessible, it is an important contribution to our appreciation of the importance of books. Working on many levels it provides a profound mediation on the book as living thing, growing out and into us.

*When Will the Book Be Done?* celebrates fifteen years of publishing by Steven Clay's Granary Books and serves as a delightful accompaniment to the two previous works. Featuring complete lists and descriptions of nearly 100 artist's books, writer/ artist collaborations, and books of theory pertaining to books, writing, and publishing, it illustrates Clay's devotion to the book as object, and as the repository of poetic language and revelation. Handsomely printed (as are the previous works), with generous color reproductions from Granary's publications, the viewer discovers a museum in a book, and finds one's appetite to touch the works therein whetted, but not sated. Steven Clay's books are destined to be some of the most cherished works of the last part of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st.

While publishing books of great literary, social, and aesthetic value, Clay also convinces of the necessity of the book's centrality as a cultural artifact. These three works form an essential library for anyone interested in the book arts.

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