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REVIEWS & PRESS

Johanna Drucker. *The Century of Artists' Books*. Granary Books, 2004.



Trusky, Tom. "Ex Libris." *Afterimage* (July/ August 1997): 19.

In "Metaphor and Form," the last chapter of *The Century of Artists' Books*, Johanna Drucker recalls a scene in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The narrator, Mr. Lockwood, has discovered a jumble of books once belonging to Heathcliff's beloved Catherine Earnshaw and is surprised to discover Catherine made use of even unread volumes. Of Catherine's books, Bronte writes and Drucker quotes: "scarcely one chapter had escaped a pen and ink commentary—at least the appearance of one—covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left. Some were detached sentences; other parts took the form of a regular diary."

Not only does Bronte's story illustrate that the book, as Drucker phrases it, "has the potential to provide a private space for communication across vast spaces of time and geography," but it also illustrates how books engender, encourage and inspire—much as Drucker's book has affected me. Not only have I been exhilarated, reading Drucker's witty and pioneering (not-quite) global history of artists' books, but I have also been unconsciously creating my very own biblio stegosaurus; on the book's attractive green dust jacket and from the book's head, tail and fore edge protrude scores of little lemon-colored Post-it notes laden with my scribbles.

Many of my Post-its simply contain a list of numbers, reminders to pay heed to Drucker's invaluable endnotes that follow each of her 14 chapters. Often opinionated, Drucker's commentary notes are welcome respites from the world of *Ibid.* and *Op. cit.* Some Post-its draw attention to Drucker's main contentions. Drucker provides a definition of what a book is, noting the dominance—"and with good reason, given its efficiency and functionality"—of the codex. But what is an artist's book? It is not just any book in which an artist may have had a small or large hand, Drucker asserts. It is "an original work of art," albeit a one-of-a-kind or multiple edition. It is not a *livre d'artiste* or "fine [letterpress] printing," though an artist's book may be finely printed—or finely mimeographed, Xeroxed, silk-screened or offset printed. According to Drucker, "artists' books are almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form." Such books are animate, personified: "ultimately, an artist's book has to have some conviction, some soul, some reason to be and to be a book in order to succeed."

Drucker admits "various shaped books... have found their way into the world of artists' books with faithful regularity—polygons and fold-up works, boxes and accordion folds, scrolls, pop-up structures.

and tunnel books," but endnotes herself, thusly: "I find many of these become gimmicky of form, except in the most whimsical or sophisticated works, but they are frequently big crowd pleasers and I will leave their detailed examination to someone more sympathetic to their virtues." Nevertheless, Drucker in no way excludes from her history eccentric (non-codex) book forms; for example, she perceptively analyzes Lucas Samaras's *Book* (1968), Clifton Meador's *Book of Doom* (1984), Scott McCarney's *In Case of Emergency* (1985), and numerous other brilliant biblio 'oddities' which pass her whimsy and/ or sophistication test, Drucker's gripe is not with oddball structure, per se, but with (would-be) book artists who employ a non-codex structure for its own sake. Pretenders, ignorant of the possibilities of relationships between form and content, produce mere novelties: Mood Rings, Scratch 'n' Sniffs, Pet Rocks for the library.

Readers will find technical notes that detail printing processes and problems extremely useful. Drucker's first-hand experiences in printing, and her collaborations with printer/ bookmaker Brad Freeman, provide her with a practical expertise we can trust as she explains the mysteries of "split fountains," "stripping" and "overprinting," as well as the economics of production.

In approximately the first third of her work, Drucker focuses on the evolution of artists' books, citing forerunners and predecessors such as William Blake and William Morris, Gelett Burgess and the often mistaken attribution of the French livres d'artistes, to books which are both manifestations and expansions of the twentieth century's major -isms, from Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Lettrism through Deconstructionism. The remaining two-thirds of *Century* chart how books have functioned, internally, as visual forms, verbal explorations, narrative and non-narrative sequences and externally, as agents of social change, conceptual spaces and documentations.

One of the most irritating features of artists' books has been their unavailability. Lacking national or international distributors, even multiple edition offset titles have remained often either invisible or difficult to obtain, only from small presses or the artist, for example. Most people have not seen most artists' books and, therefore, have not been able to appreciate what they have not seen. Drucker addresses this problem in two ways.

Drucker's first strategy is to fairly and lucidly analyze, in at least a paragraph, if not entire pages, each book she deems interesting and/ or important. Of *La Prose du Transsiberien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (1913), the collaborative bookwork by Sonia Delaunay-Terk and Blaise Cendrars (the nom de plume of Frederic-Louis Sauser), Drucker begins by summarizing the work's production (letterpress, pochoir decorations), describing its design (four square sheets of paper glued into a large square with "bright, dramatic watercolor decorations" on the left, multi-colored text on the right), and analyzing its effect (hung as a wall piece over six-feet tall, the work has a "binary character" with passages of text shaped into "large sweeping curved forms, whose play down the sheet moves the eye with a dramatic rhythmic grace which takes the whole work into account."). Drawing on her knowledge of art history, Drucker concludes:

That Delaunay [-Terk] and Cendrars could conceive of such a work in 1913 is remarkable, Paintings had shrunk from the grandiose history canvases of earlier centuries to a smaller, more domestic scale in the early Cubist period (with a few notable exceptions) and the only precedent for works of this scale in the graphic arts consisted of posters for the opera, theater, and other public events. No private reading experience had ever assumed such dimensions

. Usually, Drucker's pattern of analysis is effective because readers learn the how, what and why of each

title to then be able to judge the validity of Drucker's "why X is significant" conclusion. Sometimes readers must also rely on reproductions of works, not just Drucker's descriptions, if they are to arrive at an accurate understanding. Fortunately, Drucker's second strategy for bringing difficult to obtain, seldom-seen books to her readers is to provide a plethora of photographs, primarily from books in her personal library. Although the illustrations are not in color, readers are usually able to reference the text with 228 black-and-white photographs. Bibliophiles hooked on Technicolor may have to settle for Riva Castleman's *A Century of Artists Books* for four-color peeks at livres des artistes, Susan Compton's *The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books 1912- 1916* (1978) and *Russian Avant-Garde books 1917-34* (1993), or infrequent issues of *Print*, *Smithsonian*, and other "glossy" art magazines and exhibition catalogs that include mention of artists' books.

Drucker describes Ida Applebroog's *But I Wasn't There* (1979) as consisting of page after page of a repeated drawing, "somewhere between a cartoon and a caricature," of a woman sitting on her bed, until a blank spread is reached and "But I wasn't there" appears. Then the image is repeated, Drucker notes, and the text reappears. Drucker's conclusion—"It is this interplay between static but repeated elements which constructs the sequential effect in many of Applebroog's small books" is valid. However, the caption accompanying the photograph of a page spread from Applebroog's *A Performance* (1979) is misidentified as being from *But I Wasn't There*.

Drucker's commentary about *Dreaming Aloud, Book I* (1985) and *Dreaming Aloud, Book Two* (1988- 89) is a compelling example of lucidity, if not fairness. After discussing the subject matter and production processes of the two-book series by West Coast artist and bookmaker Betsy Davids (to whom Drucker's volume is dedicated), Drucker suggests:

The gently manipulated images have much more variety in the second volume, the distance from earlier to more sophisticated Macintosh and image interface is apparent. The color, tone, and general richness of Book Two could even pass for a contemporary interpretation of the visual density of William Morris's ornate borders and complex pages.

Drucker's annotations found in *Century* are analogous to Catherine Earnshaw's writings in her library, and Drucker's writing and personal library, like Earnshaw's, are still marvelous. A sampling of A-B-C's from Drucker's usually helpful index illustrates the range of the author's library: Alatalo, Applebroog, Baker, Baldessari, Bernstein, Beube, Boltanski, Broaddus, Broodthaers, Burke, Butler, Campbell, Carrion, Chamberlain, Chance, Chen and Crombie. Although there are continental lacunae (South America, Australia, Asia, and Africa, to name four), the author admits she would prefer to have been more inclusive in the works she has presented. Democratic, then, is one of two final descriptors applicable to *The Century of Artists' Books*, as the above (abbreviated) listing of diverse book artists reveals. The other applicable term for what Drucker has provided us is 'standard text,' until her second, corrected-and-expanded (with bibliography) edition is printed. For now *The Century of Artists' Books* is sui generis.

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Markovich, Kristine. "Review of Artists' Books." *Art Documentation* 15.1 (1996): 65.

Several volumes on artists' books have recently appeared; this one is unique in that it is centered around a bibliography. The first section of *Artists' Books* consists of short (two to five page) essays on various

historical aspects of artists' books: "The artist and the book format," "Towards a History of Artists' Books," "Mallarmé and Broodthaers," "Futurist Books," "Fluxus books," "Minimalist and Conceptual Books," and "Women and Artists' Books." Although the years 1963- 1995 are singled out in the title, they are not the focus of the essays.

A valuable note on collecting artists' books offers advice for the potential collector or librarian and begins the second and largest section. The selective bibliography of artists' books contains 503 entries based on the ARLIS UK and Eire standards for cataloging artists' books which the author helped develop. The list is arranged chronologically by publication year of the book; artist and title access are offered only through the index. There is a predominance of European publications. No selection criteria are expressed, nor is the bibliography annotated to explain an item's inclusion. Ninety-seven titles are accompanied by photographs which do not always appear on the same page as their corresponding item. Captions are not provided and the list of illustrations is at the very beginning of the book making identification awkward.

The scholarly apparatus comprise a chronology, glossary, general bibliography, and index. These are the areas which, if thoroughly developed, would have made an excellent reference work. In spite of the suggested focus on 1963- 1995, half the chronology deals with pre-1963 developments. If expanded both in number and length of post-1963 entries, the chronology could be a useful resource for the appearance of workshops and production of influential books. The one-page glossary defines important terms such as edition, issue, and impression and includes book arts terminology, but does not intend to be comprehensive. The extensive index and general bibliography distinguish this volume as a reference tool. It contains the largest bibliography on artists' books since the excellent publication *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985). Fairly comprehensive for early aspects of artists' books, the bibliography lacks some periodical literature, exhibition catalogues, and ephemeral material, especially regarding contemporary American book artists.

Electronic publications of artists' books' information is only mentioned in the essay on women artists, where Bury suggests that the World Wide Web might be a suitable publishing venue for women. A treatment of contemporary artists' books can be found in Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), a new title which provides quality discussion, photographs and citations about today's creators and collectors of artists' books, but unfortunately no bibliography. Given the growth of interest in artists' books, perhaps there will eventually be a publication combining the bibliographic effort of Bury with fully developed essays and more photographs—the ultimate artists' books reference tool. With only 223 pages (and a lot of white space), the price of this volume seems excessive, especially when there are more affordable books available. This title is recommended to libraries or museums considering collecting artists' books, or those with artists' books holdings that wish to further document items in their collections.

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Spector, Buzz. "Artists' Book Books." *Art Journal* 56.3 (1997): 95.

The 1985 publication of Joan Lyons's *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* was the first in-depth compilation of critical writings on the modern emergence of the book as work of art. That same

year Anne Moeglin-Delcroix organized *Livres d'artistes* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, an equally comprehensive exhibition and catalogue of the form. It seemed then, to artists working with the book as subject and object, that the genre had emerged as a legitimate field for serious critical and historical assessment. The first large book and exhibition would surely be followed— and quickly— by others, marking the movement of the field from the margins of the art world toward its center. Indeed, in his preface to the Lyons anthology, Dick Higgins claims that artists' books are "a form which is not, per se, new, but whose "time has come." The quotation marks in this appraisal are subtle evidence of a doubt Higgins had about his pronouncement but couldn't discuss in such hortatory circumstances.

That cautionary skepticism appears to have been well-placed, if the subsequent bibliography of the history and criticism of artists' books is a criterion. Ten years would pass before the publication of another substantial volume on the subject, Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books*, in 1995. A second book, Stephen Bury's *Artists' Books: The Book as a Work of Art, 1963-1995*, appeared a year later. These two new studies offer histories of the genre and make critical distinctions between artists' books and such related objects as *livres d'artistes*, volumes of concrete poetry, and artistically embellished found books.

In his preface, Bury wastes no time revealing the predilections he brings to artists' books: "I will simply admit my bias: that my approach is an unhappy mixture of formalism (Shlovisky's as much as Greenberg's) and functionalism; I have a liking for minimalism and conceptual art; I dislike artist's books that owe more to a cottage industry tradition than to a need for an artist to explore the book form" (xv).

A librarian at Chelsea College of Art and Design, where he also teaches modern art history and theory, Bury reveals his experience in collection cataloguing in his succinct introductory definition of artists' books: "Artists' books are books or book-like objects, over the final appearance of which an artist has had a high degree of control; where the book is intended as a work of art in itself. They are not books of reproductions of an artist's work, about an artist, or with just a text or illustrations by an artist" (1). While acknowledging the practical breakdown of his definition in the face of challenges by individual artists, these prefatory affinities guide his choice of significant artists' books for the chronology that occupies the greater part of this volume.

Following seven brief chapters elucidating an historical and critical compass for his selection, Bury offers some useful suggestions about how to develop and manage a collection of artists' books. Here his librarianship comes forth, as in his discussion of cataloguing as a means of identifying the work and its variations: "This can be schematized as a three-level hierarchy: at the top is the 'work,' in the middle the edition, and at the bottom, the individual copy, although with some books all three stages are collapsed into one or the middle or last stage might be missing" (26).

Bury makes no claims that his list, of around six hundred titles, is comprehensive. Even so, there are some surprising omissions here, notably among French artists making books. One finds no mention of Martine Abalea, Sophie Calle, Claude Closky, Paul-Armand Gette, Pascal Kem, or Francois Morellet (Moeglin-Delcroix's catalogue is also missing from the general bibliography). Despite Bury's taste for the book as concept, the California branch of Conceptualism and Neo-Conceptualism has been trimmed, too. John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler are present, as expected, but missing are Meg Cranston, John Knight, Stephen Prina, and Christopher Williams; in addition, only a single work by Michael Asher, mentor to all four, is included. Keith Smith and Philip Zimmerman, two of the most inventive makers of book structures, are absent as well, although Smith's several reference books are included in the bibliography. The photographs of individual page-spreads or book covers don't add much information,

either, though they are at least printed in larger size than the usual thumbnails in other references.

In *The Century of Artists' Books*, Johanna Drucker hesitates to fix the status of her subject, offering this introductory demurrer: "It's easy enough to state that an artists' book is a book created as an original work of art rather than a reproduction of an existing work. And also, that it is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues. However, this definition raises more questions than it answers" (2). Drucker proposes instead "a zone of activity," within which a broad range of creative work related to the book's forms, uses, and meanings can be understood by the term "artists' books." She differentiates these activities from the tradition of the *livre d'artiste*, whose technical virtuosity and material opulence are armatures within which the artist's work is isolated for specific delectation by the book's readers. Drucker is more accepting of the relationship between concrete poetry and artists' books, noting that the ways in which concrete poets have been able to extend "the parameters of what a book does as a verbal field... also extends the [ways] an artists' book can function as a poetic text" (10). She also distinguishes between artists' books and book objects— a distinction to which this reviewer paid special attention since a work of his is assessed as an example of the latter— calling attention to how the character of a specific book's identity is understood separately from the symbolically charged use of the book form. She places the "book-like object" within "the realm of sculpture, where [it] loses its functional identity as a book and becomes a formal and metaphoric icon" (362).

If Drucker's taxonomy is less than rigorous, her history of the form is very thorough. She locates the artists' book, in all of its multitudinous aspects, within every significant modern movement and draws on an extensive bibliography of scholarly references to reveal the philosophical and artistic connections among the several emerging avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. As both an art historian and a book artist, Drucker brings a unique combination of historical knowledge and practical experience to her writing. While her scholarship is certainly competent, her technical expertise serves her better in identifying the relationships between various vanguardist ideologies and the physical characteristics of the books they produced. She is a true enthusiast when she discloses this understanding in analyzing a particular work's historical significance, as in her discussion of Gelett Burgess's 1896 *Le petit journal des refusees*:

A small format work, about nine inches on its longest side, *Le Petit Journal*... was printed on outmoded wallpaper, in a trapezoidal format, with all the images and text produced through woodcuts. The cover of this journal displays the characteristic style of the work (an inelegant imitation of Aubrey Beardsley) put at the service of broad satire... The originality of the piece, a sixteen-page delirium, filled with patterns of Burgess's "goops" as well as such inventions as plaid hippopotamuses and cubical suns, was evidence of its rapid execution— done in a month of rapid work, in a single burst of energy... Even at the distance of a full century, the work is visually staking (the sinewy lines of its imitation Beardsley drawings combining with innovative patterns— though the thrust of its literary jabs may be blunted by time, their specific targets obscured, the volume functions as a thing unto itself, replete and redolent with spirit, energy, and ideas. (32).

The first four chapters of *The Century of Artists' Books* are primarily concerned with charting a history of the form, as well as identifying the social and philosophical issues with which it has been engaged. The remaining ten chapters map Drucker's cosmos of the contemporary artists' book. Her "dual-citizenship" as historian and practitioner emphatically enriches the analysis of the works in these chapters, which deal with the book as both a physical structure and a mode of communication.

Drucker's criticism of a number of artists better known for work in other media, such as Marcel Broodthaers or Sol LeWitt, emphasizes the importance of the book within their larger artistic interests. Her analyses of Broodthaers's *Un coup de des* (1969), or LeWitt's *Autobiography* (1980), offer unexpected insight into the importance of narrative and sequence to these seminal Conceptualists. Drucker can also bring a wry and erotic wit to her discussion. Read her view of Ida Applebroog's *But I Wasn't There*, an offset book of drawings from 1979:

[T]he image is of a woman sitting in her bed. Applebroog's graphic style is somewhere between a cartoon and a caricature, a biting drawing and a bland one. The figure in the bed just sits. The single image does not change, but is repeated through one turn after another. Then there is a blank spread and the comment, "But I wasn't there." This is followed by several more turns showing the image, another blank spread, and a final restatement of "But I wasn't there."... The repetition in this work makes the sequence a rapid one— the pages can be fumed quickly, in search of a resolution. But the resolution does not come, it is, in fact, embedded in the very repetition which seems to move so rapidly towards an end (260-61).

Describing, discussing, and analyzing almost three hundred contemporary artists' books, Drucker reveals the wealth of affective characteristics within the field. Even so, some of the same omissions that Bury makes occur here. Again, many recent French and Italian book artists are missing (although she does mention Paul-Armand Gette's work), as are the California Conceptualists besides Baldessari and Huebler. Gerhard Richter is also absent, even though his *128 Details from a Picture* (1980) is as meaningful a critique of the limitations of photographic documentation, and of the exhibition catalogue, as any bookwork ever published. Although the many reproductions in Drucker's book are quite small, her inclusion of multiple page-spreads from many works allows at least a glimpse at how sequence functions in the books she discusses.

Drucker's work transcends its minor problems, though, through the expansiveness of its references and its deeply felt engagement with its subject. The book vastly expands our understanding of the interdependence of structure and meaning in artists' books, and establishes a more rigorous standard of criticism and analysis for the genre. For all her enthusiasm for books, Drucker's willingness to assert the successes and failures within the form's various parameters may instigate a further flowering of the criticism so long awaited by artists of the book.

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"The Century of Artists' Books." *The Bloomsbury Review* (November/ December 2002).

Johanna Drucker, book artist and associate professor of contemporary art at Yale University, examines the 100-year development of artists' books, what she considers "the quintessential 20th-century artform." Her book fills a gap, as there are very few critical books about artists' books. Here she discusses some of the most well-known book artists and their work, including modernist artists such as Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and Ed Ruscha, as well as more recent work. She deals with the themes of artists' book as idea and form, democratic multiple, rare object, visual form, verbal exploration, sequence, agent of social change, conceptual space, and document. There are numerous black-and-white reproductions of the works throughout the book.

Frosch, Paula. "Review of *The Century of Artists' Books*." *Library Journal* (June 15, 1996).

A folded fan, a set of blocks, words embedded in lucite: artists' books are a singular form of imaginative expression. With the insight of the artist and the discernment of the art historian, Drucker (*The Alphabet Labyrinth*, *LJ* 2/ 15/ 95) details over 200 of these works, relating them to the variety of art movements of the last century and tracing their development in form and concept. This work, one of the first full-length studies available of artists' books, provides both a critical analysis of the structures themselves and a basis for further reflection on the philosophical and conceptual roles they play. From codex to document, from performance to self-image, the world of artists' books is made available to student and teacher, collector and connoisseur. A useful work for all art collections, both public and academic.