

Book Art (1985)

The old art assumes that printed words are printed on an ideal space. The new art knows that books exist as objects in an exterior reality, subject to concrete conditions of perception, existence, exchange, consumption, use, etc.

—Ulises Carrión, "What a Book Is" (1975)

The principal difference between the book hack and the book artist is that the former succumbs to the conventions of the medium, while the latter envisions what else "the book" might become. Whereas the hack writes prose that "reads easily" or designs pages that resemble one another and do not call attention to themselves, the book artist transcends those conventions.

The book hack is a housepainter, so to speak, filling the available walls in a familiar uniform fashion; the other is an artist, imagining unprecedented possibilities for bookish materials. The first aspires to coverage and acceptability; the second to invention and quality.

Common books look familiar; uncommon books do not. Book art is not synonymous with book design or literary art; it is something else.

Three innate characteristics of the book are the cover, which both protects the contents and gives certain clues to its nature; the page, which is the discrete unit; and a structure of sequence; but perhaps neither cover nor pages nor sequence is a genuine prerequisite to a final definition of a *book*.

The process indigenous to book-reading is the human act of shifting attention from one "page" to another, but perhaps this is not essential either.

The attractions of the book as a communications medium are that individual objects can be relatively cheap to make and distribute, that it is customarily portable and easily stored, that its contents are conveniently accessible, that it can be experienced by oneself at one's own speed without a playback machine (unlike theater, video, audio or movies), and that it is more spatially economical (measured by extrinsic experience over intrinsic volume) than other non-electronic media. A book also allows its reader random access, in contrast to audiotape and videotape, whose programmed sequences permit only linear access; with a book you can go from one page to another, both forwards and backwards, as quickly as you can go from one page to the next.

Because a book's text is infinitely replicable, the number of copies that can be printed is theoretically limitless. By contrast, a traditional art object is unique while a multiple print appears in an edition whose number is intentionally limited at the point of production. It is possible to make a unique book, such as a handwritten journal or sketchbook, or to make an edition of books limited by number and autograph; but in the esthetic marketplace, the first is really a "book as art object," which becomes known only through public display, while the second is, so to speak, a "book as print" (that is destined less for exhibition than for specialized collections).

The economic difference between a standard book object and an art object is that the latter needs only a single purchaser, while the former needs many buyers to be

financially feasible. Therefore, the art dealer is a retailer, in personal contact with his potential customers, while the book publisher is a wholesaler, distributing largely to retailers, rather than to the ultimate customers.

The practical predicament of commercial publishers in the eighties is that they will not publish an "adult trade" book unless their salesmen can securely predict at least several thousand hardback purchasers or twice as many paperback purchasers within a few months. Since any proposed book that is unconventional in format could never be approved by editorial-industrial salesmen, commercial publishers are interested only in book hacks (and in "artists" posing as book hacks, such as Andy Warhol).

What is most necessary now, simply for the development of the book as an imaginative form, are publishers who can survive economically with less numerous editions at reasonable prices.

There is a crucial difference between presenting an artist's work in book form—a retrospective collection of reproductions—and an artist making a book. The first is an *art book*. The honorific "book art" should be saved for books that are works of art, as well as books.

The book artist usually controls not just what will fill the pages but how they will be designed and produced and then bound and covered, and the book artist often becomes its publisher and distributor too, eliminating middle-men all along the line and perhaps creatively reconsidering their functions as well.

One practice common to both books and paintings is that the ultimate repository of anything worth preserving is the archive—the art museum for the invaluable painting, and the research library for the essential book.

One trouble with the current term "artists' books" is that it defines a work of art by the initial profession (or education) of its author, rather than by qualities of the work itself. Since genuine critical categories are meant to define art of a particular kind, it is a false term. The art at hand is books, no matter who did them; and it is differences among them, rather than in their authorship, that should comprise the stuff of critical discourse.

Indeed, the term "artists' books" incorporates the suggestion that such work should be set aside in a space separate from writers' books—that, by implication, they constitute a minor league apart from the big league of real books. One wish I make for my own books is that they never belonged to any considered minor league.

The squarest thing "an artist" can do nowadays is necessarily compress an imaginative idea into a rectangular format bound along its longest side. Some sequential ideas work best that way; others do not.

In theory, there are no limits upon the kinds of materials that can be put between two covers, or how those materials can be arranged.

This essential distinction separates imaginative books from conventional books. In the latter, syntactically familiar sentences are set in rectangular blocks of uniform type (resembling soldiers in a parade), and these are then "designed" into pages that look like one another (and like pages we have previously seen). An imaginative book, by definition, attempts to realize something else with syntax, with format, with pages, with covers, with, size, with shapes, with sequence, with structure, with binding—with any or all of

these elements, the decisions informing each of them ideally reflecting the needs and suggestions of the materials particular to this book.

Most books are primarily about something outside themselves; most book art books are primarily about themselves. Most books are read for information, either expository or dramatized; book art books are made to communicate imaginative phenomena and thus create a different kind of "reading" experience.

An innovative book is likely to strike the common reviewer as a "nonbook" or "antibook." The appearance of such terms in a review is, on second thought, a sure measure of a book's originality. The novelist Flannery O'Connor once declared, "If it looks funny on the page, I won't read it." Joyce Carol Oates once commended this sentiment in a review of O'Connor. No, a "funny" appearance is really initial evidence of serious book artistry.

Imaginative books usually depend as much on visual literacy as on verbal literacy; many "readers" literate in the second respect are illiterate in the first.

One purpose for the present is to see what alternative forms and materials "the book" can take: Can it be a pack of shufflable cards? Can it be a long folded accordion strip? Can it have two front covers and be "read" in both directions? Can it be a single chart? An audiotape? A videotape? A film?

Is it "a book" if its maker says it is?

With these possibilities in mind, we can recognize and make a future for the book.

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for a new version of this short essay that appeared in the Joan Lyons anthology