Cover Page

The Unlimited Artist's Book

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As a curator in a library—the National Library of the Netherlands—I am supposed to buy books, not paintings, or drawings, or prints, or other non-book objects. However, when it comes to artist's books, I regularly buy objects that can almost not be identified as books, such as gilded etching plates, hand painted concertina screens, or even handkerchiefs.

The terminology of the artist's book is confusing. Essays on artists' books more often than not start with a failed attempt to define the subject, sounding like a deep sigh: 'The term artists' books is difficult to define,'[1] or: 'Es gibt keine verbindliche Form, noch existiert eine allgemeine Übereinkunft darüber, was denn ein Künstlerbuch letztendlich nun eigentlich ist.'[2]

The combination of the terms 'art' and 'book' became an issue in the 1970s, when people started to collect, exhibit, and write about the modern (American) artist's book, that has been around since the early sixties.[3] The intentions of the makers, the production, and the distribution of these books diverged vastly from the older French tradition of the artist's book, that, up to then, was called the 'livre d'artiste', and went back to the 1890s.[4] It took some time for people to realise that 'artist's book' was not a literal translation of the French term 'livre d'artiste', but rather the name of an entirely different phenomenon. The 'livre d'artiste' was a book that resulted from a collaboration between an artist and a writer (and, usually, an art dealer). The 'artist's book', on the other hand, was a work of art, that had taken on the form of a book, for which only one artist was responsible. The art of the book versus the book as art.

From this terminological intersection emerged an extravagance of new terms. The French 'livre d'artiste' could now be called a 'livre de peintre', a 'livre de conversation', or a 'livre de luxe', but, 'Le débat reste cependant ouvert.'[5] And, after the 1980s, when new book types were published, the number of terms increased to include the

'livre manuscrit', the 'livre objet' (or even 'poème objet') and the 'livre-collage'. The American artist's book acquired new names as well, such as 'bookworks' and 'book art'.

The gap between the 'livre d'artiste' and the 'artist's book' has since been filled with a multitude of other book forms, and 'the rubric now covers the full spectrum from expensively-produced limited editions to inexpensive multiples.'[6] The original boundaries between 'livre d'artiste' and 'artist's book' have disappeared.

With the rise of digitised book forms the term 'book' itself has ended up in an identity crisis, of which it has not yet recovered. A book that used to be a book—the Gutenberg Bible for instance—did not stop being a book. Its digitised versions were labelled e-books, but might deserve a radically different name, depending on the use(r). The book as an object versus the book as a virtual entity.

Collecting artists' books is adventurous because of these unsettled boundaries of art and of the book

Book historians have discussed the possible expansion of the term 'book', as was already the case with 'text'. Text could be a printed page, an image, an oral communication, and even an object that transmitted meaning. The definition of the 'artist's book' is complicated, not only because of the term 'book'; the other word, 'art', is also elusive. What is art? Wikipedia (our man in the street) answers: 'Art is a diverse range of human activities and the products of those activities.'[7] This is not very helpful.

What if we go one step further, and try to eliminate our understanding of the term 'artist's book'? Or, put differently: can we learn more about the artist's book by embracing its seemingly borderless existence? Can we define the artist's book by crossing boundaries? It is not unthinkable that I buy books that later will not be labelled as books at all, but as works of art. Or, it might be that I am buying art works that will not be seen as such (as art) by future generations; and there is always the risk that one collects objects that are neither art nor books. Collecting artists' books is adventurous because of these unsettled boundaries of art and of the book.

This being said, an audience immediately recognises the bookishness and the art qualities of an object in a library, even if it is a novelty kind of artist's book. And, as Johanna Drucker argued, 'the compelling quality of artists' books is the way in which they call attention to the specific character of a book's identity while they embody the expressive complexity of the book as a communicative form.'[8] It implies that the book will reveal its visual, verbal, literal and metaphoric information in a complex way, and that the term 'reader' has lost its plain meaning. The reader has to be a viewer—and, reading and viewing at the same time, an interpreter is at work.

In a sense, every reader has always been a viewer, as the form of each character or series of characters (words and word sequences) has to be recognised. Words are images. The reader may not consider words to be images—the words make up a text. It should be born in mind that every text, for example the word 'tree', is actually a series

of signs (images), that transcend meaning. Other images, for example a photograph of a tree, do not have the advantage of a language-based system of interpretation to convey meaning. In a work of art, the personal intentions of the artist can obscure an objective significance even further.

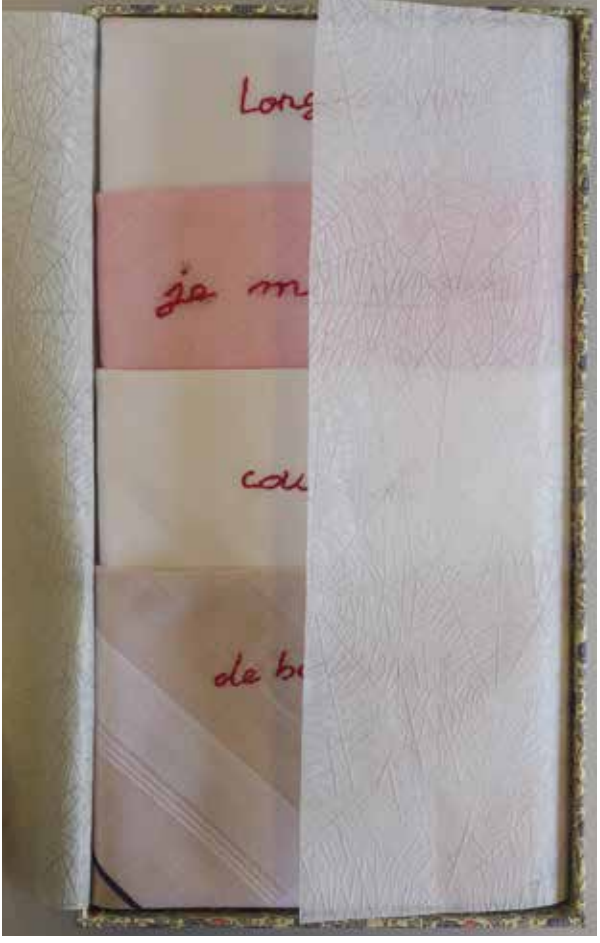
In words, the meaning of 'tree' is well defined, although, the exact meaning may vary according to the situation. If the word is found in a work of art, a poem for example, the meaning can be less explicit. In art, in an image, significance always has this ambiguous quality, this uncertainty. The artist's book brings the two together and the reader—who at the same time is the viewerof an artist's book may struggle with the confusing fields of significance: text and image, while the materiality of the book brings to this a third field of significance. Paper, ink, structure, folding, binding, interaction of text and image: all these elements (may) have a meaning as well.

Book historians, art historians, librarians, and curators may have struggled over the terminology—because they needed terms and definitions for a thesis, a budget report, or a collection policy statement. The user of a library or the visitor of a museum, however, could not bother less. The viewer wants to enjoy the artist's book. That is, if it is on show. Apart from a terminological battlefield, there is the no-man's-land of the exhibition space with its glass cases where the artist's book cannot be shown to perfection. The viewer has access to two pages, or a cover (or a digitised version), and nothing more than a short description. The opportunity to handle the book is rarely given to the viewer, as the books are considered too fragile or, when they are expensive, liable to theft, however, it can be done. Usually a curator presents the objects to a limited number of people gathered around a table, and sometimes they will be allowed to handle a number of books.

Fig. 1: The original etching plates for *Iiinx*, a book with text by Régine Detambel and etchings by Martine Rassineux, designed by François Da Ros.

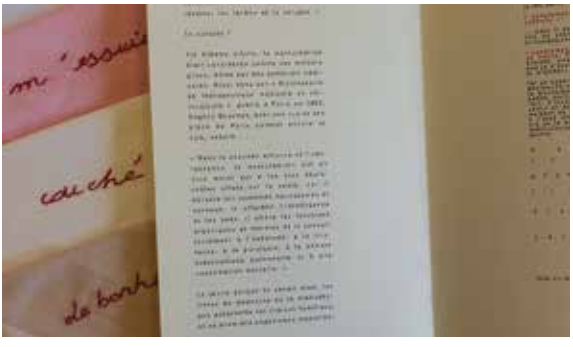
The presentation intensifies the complexity of inter-woven meanings of text, image, and material. In a group setting, the number of possible interpretations of an artist's book is multiplied. The view of the 'reader(s)' and the curator (can) create a multi-level new concept of the book. A publication of these views will reach an even larger audience and thus a widened circle of interpretations is created. But even if only one reader/viewer examines only one artist's book, the number of interpretations is unlimited. The order of sensations may be different each time, the impact of the book is not fixed, and, as Ulysses Carrión stated, 'in the new art every book requires a different reading.'[9]

My role as an intermediary between the (artist's) book and the reader/viewer is focused on access, on giving opportunities to the reader. This is possible only if I restrain myself to showing the book and telling the artist's story of the book. In fact, the artist's story may be obtrusive, distractive, and perhaps should not be told. The question is:



Above, left: *Save Antarctica*, a hand-painted book by Nicole Morello.

Right, top and bottom: *Les mouchoirs de Proust* by Nicole Morello



how much do you need to know to be able to read and view the book? This can only be determined by the reader/viewer.

The 'books' that I mentioned in the first paragraph are contemporary works. The gilded plates belong to a unique copy of a book, *Ilinx*, with a text by Régine Detambel, and etchings by Martine Rassineux. The book was designed and printed by François Da Ros for Anakatabase in 2010. Figure 1, in a type case like wooden box, contains the original etching plates, which were made unusable by a layer of gold. For every

Anakatabase edition one unique copy is being made, usually for a library where a large collection of Da Ros's work is kept. The Koopman Collection holds an almost complete series of his books, including this unique copy.

The hand painted concertina screen is the work of Nicole Morello, published in Düsseldorf in 1998. Usually, Morello makes unique books only, but this time she produced an edition of thirty copies. The hand-painted book is called *Save Antarctica*, and it consists of thick paper pages that are pasted together to form a concertino book, showing hundreds of penguins on icebergs. The handkerchiefs, by the same artist, are part of a Marcel Proust edition, *Les mouchoirs de Proust*. Each copy contains a booklet and four uniquely embroidered handkerchiefs that contain an allusion to Proust's famous first sentence of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

These factual comments may be enriched with a multitude of interpretations, and so much so, that the reader will be overwhelmed by them. One can practice the art of reading an artist's book with its combined skills of viewing, reading, and interpreting. However, reading is taught at school, like writing, but looking is not; perhaps it is time to add this discipline to the curriculum. ■

Notes

1. For example, J. J. Rossman, 'The Term Artists' Book', *Yale University Libraries*, n.d. <http://guides.library.yale.edu/content.php?pid=17291&sid=4118526> (accessed March 2014).
2. M. Glasmeier, *Die Bücher der Künstler. Publikationen und Editionen seit den sechziger Jahren in Deutsch land. Eine Ausstellung in zehn Kapiteln* (Stuttgart/London: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1994), p. 11.
3. A famous example is Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, published by his own National Excelsior Press (1963).
4. Often quoted is Paul Verlaine's *Parallèlement*, with lithographs by Pierre Bonnard, published by Ambroise Vollard (1900).
5. Syndicat national de la Librairie Ancienne et Moderne (SLAM), 'Livre de peintre', I*nternational League of Antiquarian Booksellers,* n.d. <http://www.ilab.org/eng/glossary/443-livre_de_peintre.html> (March 2014).
6. J. Drucker, *Figuring the Word. Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetry* (New York, NY: Granary Books, 1998), p. 175.
7. 'Art', *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art> (accessed March 2014).
8. J. Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York, NY: Granary Books, 1995), p. 359.
9. U. Carrión, *Quant aux livres. On Books* (Genève: Héros-Limite, 2008), p. 147.