'A Great Idea at the Time': Cataloguing South Africa's Artist's Book Production

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Abstract:

Since 2006, Jack Ginsberg, the internationally renowned private collector of artists' books and I have set about creating a database of every artist's book produced in South Africa. By isolating the South African books in the Ginsberg Collection as well as the books I had come across in my research, we began to construct not only a bespoke database but also a wild bibliographic dream. It was hoped that this dream would gain such momentum within the South African book arts community that awareness of its existence as an index of a fledgling activity might promote the making of more objects which would then surpass the database's ability to keep up with production. One of the most well documented problems facing appropriate mechanisms for the cataloguing for artists' books is grappling with the hybrid nature of the items to be catalogued, each of which claims some territory within the disputed space of the book arts. This paper examines the progress of our database and discusses problems associated with its necessary refinement. Taking Anne Thurmann-Jajes' Manual for Artists' Publications (2010) as a point of departure, the paper examines three South African artists' books which represent both the diversity of the field and the complexity of the cataloguing task. The paper suggests a local set of descriptors of types of artists' books that help to describe the South African output more meaningfully.

Keywords: Ginsberg Collection, South African artists' books, online database, catalogue

> *For all their undeniable visual appeal, artists' books can be a trial to the cataloger.*
> Elizabeth Lilker. Review of *Artists' Books: a Cataloguer's Manual* (2009:47).

As part of my Masters degree titled *South African Artists Books and Book-objects Since 1960*, completed in 2000, I included an inventory that documented each book and book-object I had found during my research. By identifying all the South African books in Jack Ginsberg's renowned Johannesburg-based private collection of artists' books (Fig.1), as well as the books I had come across during my postgraduate studies, our research associate

Rosalind Cleaver and I set about creating a wild bibliographic dream. The dream took the form of an accurate database cataloguing the bibliographic data of every artist's book produced in the country, and we believed this to be a viable project at the time. It was facilitated by Cape Town-based Peter Dennis of Logos Flow, whose suite of on- and off-line database software kept track of the multi-facetted Ginsberg Collections which include artists' books, and over 3000 books, tracts, catalogues, dissertations and journal articles on the Book Arts.
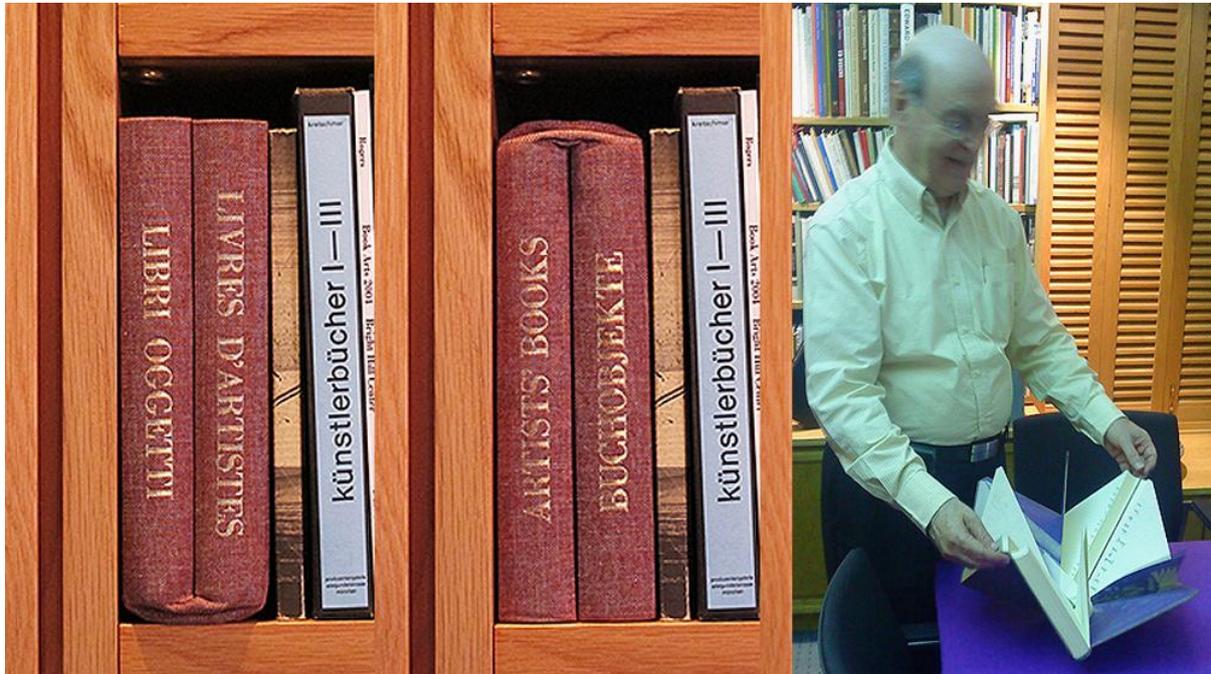

Fig.1. View of Jack Ginsberg in his library of artists' books. Johannesburg. 2014. Photograph: David Paton.

Logos Flow's off-line Resource Management Database allows Ginsberg to compartmentalise the various categories within his collections, for example, artists' books as distinct from books on artists' books. In the early part of our collaboration, the Resource Management Database also offered me the means to extend and annotate my rudimentary post-Masters database of books which lay outside of the Ginsberg Collection. Thus this software became the connective tissue between these two separate databases.

In 2006, Ginsberg, Cleaver, Dennis and I took the decision to make available a searchable on-line database of South African artists' books for the first time on the website *www.theartistsbook.org.za*. Given where we find ourselves today, we can no longer presumptuously hope to represent 'the output of a nation'; rather our project now reflects the growing diversity of artist's book production in South Africa.

It is one thing for Ginsberg to document his private collection in the manner which best suits him and quite another to make this information public and thus open to scrutiny and criticism. Such scrutiny involves the general public who wants logical, easy access to information of interest; researchers who require credible, accurate and meaningful returns on their search terms; and bibliophiles who require data to adhere to at least the basic rules and requirements of current cataloging codes such as *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules 2nd Edition* (AACR2), *Machine-Readable Cataloging standards* (MARC 21) and *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) approved lists. Whilst none of the four protagonists in this story are librarians or have formal training in Library Sciences, Ginsberg (2013:iii) has long been

interested in the rather esoteric field of bibliography and enjoys the vicarious reading of bibliographies and bibliographical theory. For many years he kept a simple card index of his collection but has converted to Logos Flow's electronic database making searches much easier and the publication of bibliographies such as his feasible.

Coming at artists' books' complexity, multi-modal and multiplicitous forms from a bibliographic perspective is Anne Thurmann-Jajes' *Manual for Artists' Publications (MAP): Cataloguing Rules, Definitions, and Descriptions* (2010). This book is in Ginsberg's collection and its content formed part of our earlier debates on how we might nuance the sub-categories of artists' books on our database. This book and our debates led to the writing of this paper. Her point of departure is to provide cataloguing criteria for fourteen forms of artists' published output including records, audio cassettes and CDs, films and videos, photographic editions, graphic work, multiples as well as ephemera. Thurmann-Jajes separates 'artists' books' from distinct other categories such as 'artists' magazines and newspapers', 'edition objects' and 'multiples'. Of interest to our project is the manner in which she lists discrete *Primary Subform* for artists' books (which she defines as "characteristic as original artists' books" (p52)), *Secondary Subforms* (which she defines as "facultatively associated with artists' books based upon their content-related references" (p52)), and *Genres* (defined as "the thematic areas in which the artist's book as a medium is conceptually involved" (p52) and thus an almost limitless list). For the purposes of our cataloguing project, the Collection On-line Database organises and manages data in item-centric and producer-centric modes that interact with and cross-reference each other. In item-centric mode the fields: Item (display) Title; Description; Medium; Measurements; Inscription; Edition; Dates and Keywords, amongst others, appear. It is within this mode that our latest and most important work has been done.

In producer-centric mode fields for the Artist and other Producers' Names; Biographic data; Nationality; Gender; Exhibitions; Education; Awards as well as Keywords appear and these fields are accompanied by metadata including assigned and reference numbers, filters and website links.

Contemporary debates in the field of the book arts regarding what does and what does not constitute an artist's book as well as the complexities and stresses associated with their appropriate cataloguing in public collections have elicited many and varied responses. As far back as 1991, Timothy Shipe (1991:24) stated that:

> The thing to remember in considering artists' books is that AACR2 is a standard for *bibliographic* description. When a library catalogs an artist's book, the work is being described in its aspect as a bibliographic entity, not as an art object. ... The art-object aspect of the artist's book is provided for in subject cataloging. … This is perfectly adequate for artists' books which do not play with the traditional format of the book. It may or may not be adequate for the sort of artist's book that experiments in a radical way with our expectations of the book format or with our very definition of a book. The question is: should the description of a work in a library catalog be as complete as a museum description?

In *Artists' Books and Beyond: The Library of the Museum of Modern Art as a Curatorial and Research Resource* Janis Ekdahl (1999:247) describes the need for expanding the reference to artists' books. She states that:

> At MoMA the basic bibliographic record is amplified, when appropriate, with descriptions of physical characteristics and subject matter. ... Also awareness of the collection is enhanced through exhibitions … The Library also has a small display area where artists' books are regularly featured.

Ekdahl's reference to an 'amplified' database which is enhanced by exhibitions and displays forges a potent argument for a tripartite relationship between library, living database and gallery (whether real or virtual) in order to cope with artists' books' often delinquent nature.

Andrea Chemero, Caroline Seigel and Terrie Wilson's (2000:23) survey on collecting, cataloguing and preserving artists' books in US libraries also emphasises promotion, book exhibitions and displays as well as the importance of "expanded descriptions" in the cataloguing process.

In her revealingly titled article *Artists' Books: Managing the Unmanageable*, Nola Farman (2007:324) states that

> the librarian must show some skills that could be associated with forensic science! Within the library's organizational scheme, that is usually constructed for the written word, it is difficult to identify and systematically organise visual play and especially that which skips between word, image and material.

What is evident is that artists' books not only concern departments of Visual Art but also graduate courses in Library Sciences. In her PhD thesis completed in the School of Library & Information Studies, University of Alabama in 2013, Amanda Roth Clarke (2013:153) states: "Foundational to the cataloging of artists' books however, may be simply an empathy for the genre", an idea which has implications for my South African exemplars later in this paper. Clarke mentions Louise Kulp's *Artists' Books in Libraries: A Review of the Literature* (2005) in which Kulp (2005:7) describes Stanford cataloger Kay Teel's article *Challenges to Cataloging Artists' Books*, as "a refreshing antidote to the anxious, technical, and procedurally heavy approach that many authors take to the topic". Teel (in Kulp 2005:7) continues with her now famous encouragement to "[u]se the cataloging tools you have and use them freely, exploiting the fullest flexibility of the MARC record. … In short, 'stop agonizing!'". Kulp (2005:7) also describes Carnegie Mellon book collection custodian Maureen Dawley's citing of "*binding* (e.g., codex, concertina, spiral, stab, etc.) as the most searched-for artists' book descriptor. Thus, the factor that poses the biggest challenge to catalogers, description, is also the most crucial for access". Annie Herlocker's 2012 (in Myers & Myers 2014:62) survey of academic libraries with artists' book collections indicates that students are most likely to request artists' books by searching for specific binding types, subjects and materials, "making the structure of the book at least as important as the subject matter and intellectual content".

In her Masters dissertation *Categorizing the Unique: Analyzing Artists' Books for a Framework of Description* (2005), Michelle Stover (2005:19) found that artists' books "... wide ranging differences in form, method, and subject made it almost impossible to unify categories of description" and that " ... it is not the catalogers [sic] place to ascribe meaning" (2005:25). Even "enhanced cataloguing" (2005:42) proved unhelpful, a realisation echoed in Ann and William Myers' article *Opening Artists' Books to the User* (2014) where their cataloguing project, completed in line with MARC and AACR2 criteria, required an even fuller record in which "intellectual content" (2014:62) and "artist's intention" (2014:65) were recorded in extensive prose notes. Myers & Meyers state (2104:65) however, that "even the

more complete record stumbles on the fact that the work covers so many topics, often in a cursory or even free associational way, that it is difficult to represent what the book is 'about'". Stover's solution was the creation of a separate database facilitating complex searching from multiple access points in support of the curriculum and/or mission of the institution served at a local level and, if possible, should include images as they clarify the physical embodiment of the work (2005:45). Stover (2005:46-47) concludes her study with an important observation that in order to understand, accommodate, describe and catalogue a group of objects as unique and idiosyncratic as an artist's book collection "one must spend countless hours with the books, turning their pages, learning their tricks, feeling their materials, examining their story lines", thus describing how a cataloguer acquires what Clarke (2013:153) terms "an empathy for the genre".

It is clear that any online cataloguing project needs to be logical, navigable and useful in terms of its responsiveness to search terms as well as in its level of descriptiveness of items that are returned in general searches. In relation to the particular space of our private-public project, however, we are able to work a little outside of the conventions and rules to which a public or academic library would need to adhere. It is also clear from the above references that something richer, more affectively in tune with the book-as-artwork, is needed in the record. Thurmann-Jajes' fourteen *Forms* identified in her *Cataloguing Rules, Definitions, and Descriptions* (2010), although useful in terms of large and complex organisational structures do not help our project's specific focus upon the idiosyncrasies of South African artist's book production. It has also become clear, that our ubiquitous and blunt entry for the field *Category Type* which read 'South African Artist's Book', no longer sufficed and was in need of nuancing and greater complexity especially given the fact that the site specifically documents and catalogues South African artists' books, what Shipe (1991:23) enviously describes as "… a library that collects nothing but artists' books". The task at hand is to populate our newly created fields; *Category*, *Type*, *Subtype* and *Theme(s)* for each item so as to leverage not only the most useful and appropriate *Definitions, and Descriptions* which Thurmann-Jajes suggests, but also acknowledge that this implies conflating the suggested entries for *Category Forms* such as 'Artists' Magazines' and 'Newspapers' as well as 'Book Objects' and 'Multiples', and their associated *Primary Subforms*. For us, this would pull into the gravitational field of the artist's book, *Primary Subforms* such as 'Object magazine' or 'Newspaper', 'Broadside', and more critically, 'Book-object', as well as 'Book-shaped-object' (BSO), 'Book sculpture', 'Object in book form', 'Book installation', 'Book multiple', 'Photo book', 'Typewriter work', 'Artist's postcards' and any related book-based ephemera. Thus we have conflated the very categories Thurmann-Jajes has worked so hard to differentiate!

One of the more advantageous elements of contemporary online databases and catalogues is the presence of imagery. Such imagistic presence evokes Ekdahl's (1999:247) and Chemero's et.al, (2000:23) references to an 'amplified' database which is enhanced by the exhibition of exemplars as well as Stover's (2005:16) recommendation for such inclusion within a parallel database. The availability and presence of digital images are described in Georgia Harper's (in Shincavich 2004:11) "rules of thumb" of fair use as: without any commercial value; used for academic and research purposes; in low resolution (72ppi) not for printing; with limited on-screen enlargement capability; with the reproduced elements being a small proportion of the totality of the work thus having little effect on the market of the original work. Our website states the following on its home page: "All artists' books are copyright to the artist or owner. If there are any queries in this regard, you are welcome to contact us". Images have thus become a mini exhibition of the work, amplifying its catalogue entry under physical

description, subject matter, genre and content. This is evident in the local exemplars discussed below.

I now briefly discuss three very different South African exemplars. The purpose of this is to glimpse, firstly, diversity within the local field, secondly, speculate upon our new fields; *Category*, *Type*, *Subtype* and *Theme(s)* with which these books might be associated, fields which have been strategically modified, added to and renamed in response to the research and writing of this paper. Thirdly, suggest an appropriate place for the storing of collections of such items – especially the future home of the Ginsberg Collections. In this regard it is important to state that, unlike the ubiquitous collections of artists' books associated with American universities, no single South African university as yet contains a meaningful body of artists' books in its Special Collections. I argue then that a library specifically attached to an art gallery, in other words the library *of* the art gallery of a university is the most appropriate place for the future housing of these artists' books in a South African context.

Exemplar one (Fig.2)

Antibody (1993)
Belinda Blignaut

Johanna Drucker (2003:sp) states that artists' books "... mark the shift from the conception of books as artifacts, or documents as vehicles for delivery of content, and instead demonstrate the living, dynamic nature of works as produced by interpretive acts". Earlier, Drucker (1995:161) describes how artists' books exploit the structural, technical and graphic conceits that call attention to the conventions by which, through constant exposure, a book normally neutralises its identity.

Blignaut's codex is an excellent example of these characteristics of the artist's book: the interrogation of bookness in such a way that self-consciousness and reflexivity are typical interpretive acts. What I mean by this is that a book is 'aware of itself' as a work of art by reflexively pointing toward its content through the agency of its own structural elements, materiality and navigability. In this exemplar, the small, square, spiral-bound book begins to communicate its content metaphorically through its cover's materiality. The cover boards are pieces of thin aluminium plate with the front cover cut and sutured from the bottom up. The bleak transparency of the texts and images bleeds between the pages suggesting the depth of the wound whilst the book's temporal aspect indexes the period of time over which damage is done. Very few books manage to integrate the cover board with the internal pages as successfully as Blignaut has done, by means of the signification of aluminium and acetate as skin and tissue.

If the self-conscious interrogation of the material from which a book is made is often characteristic of artists' books, then all other physical determinants are equally subject to such interrogation. The shape and physical structure of books are obvious aspects that artists can manipulate in pursuit of meaning. However if a characteristic of the artist's book is the manner in which bookness is interrogated as more than a mere container of information delivery, then this very self-consciousness and reflexivity needs to be brought into the descriptive field on the database. Finding an appropriate place in the record helps to capture the spirit of the artist's intent and the book's content over and above the cool, detached and perfunctory list of necessary bibliographic facts: an inclusion of connoted *with* denotative information, the affective along with the factual. We have responded to Janges, Shipe,

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Meyers & Meyers and Stover by including a field in which such affective and reflexive content can be reflected, making our record for *Antibody* more nuanced, complex and complete than ever before.
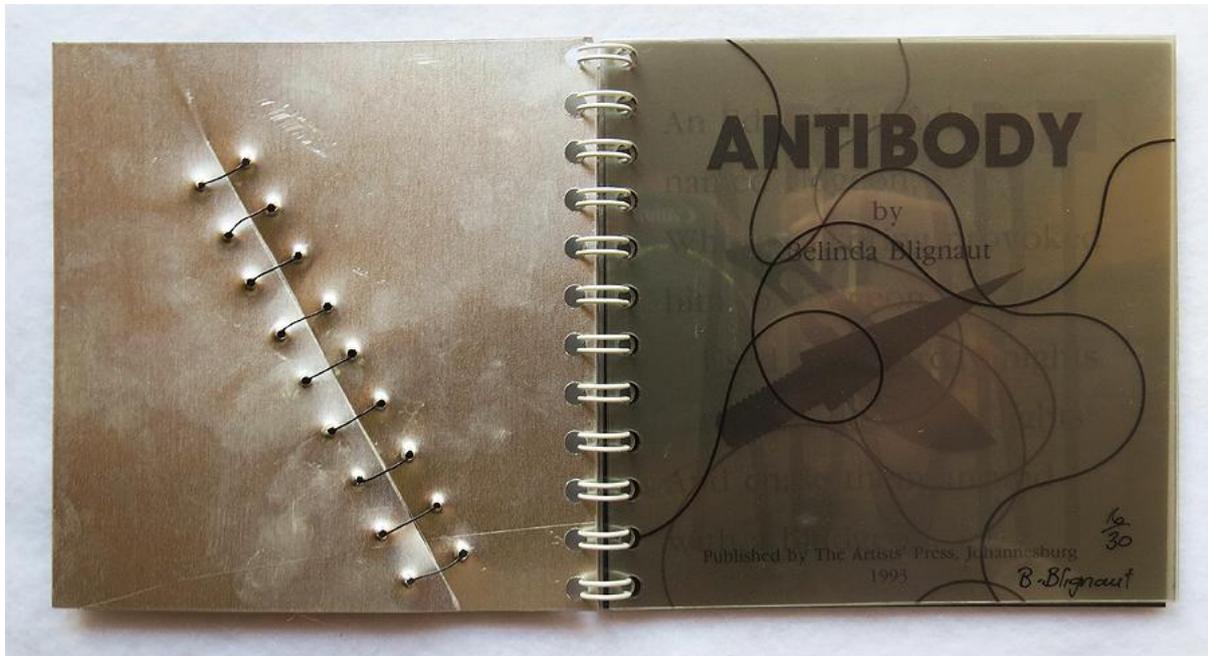

Fig.2. Belinda Blignaut. *Antibody*. 1993. 100mm (h). Photographic acetate positives, aluminium and nylon. Edition: #16/30. Photograph: David Paton.

Exemplar two (Fig.3)

Fire Walker *William Kentridge. Gerard Marx.* (2011)
William Kentridge - (title & artist)
Gerhard Marx - (title & artist)
Oliver Barstow - (edited and designed by)
Bronwyn Law-Viljoen - (edited with an introduction by)

The project is devoted to an ordinary South African woman who arrives on the streets of Johannesburg carrying a burning brazier on her head, ready to cook her day's ration of corn-on-the-cob which she sells to passers-by. The book is part of a larger project that includes a public sculpture in downtown Johannesburg.

Our entry reflects the presence of a book in a half-slipcase in red, annotated with eight *Articles* which index the interviews, textual and photographic essays found in the book. Our entry also notes the presence of a print by Marx titled *Foot Map* and another by Kentridge titled *Goldmann's South African Mining and Finance*, numbered, as is the edition as a whole, 27/40. Our entry also acknowledges the steel cutout of the Fire Walker inserted into the cover. However, even if we were to include an entry in the *Genre* field such as Thurmann-Jajes suggests, a field we have titled *Theme(s)*, what entry might appropriately capture the essence of Marx's and Kentridge's words: "urban and rural mores colliding in the wildly textured and richly flavoured economic melting pot of the city" or "a twentieth-century Johannesburg archetype that is fast fading from the picture"? Kentridge and Marx's project is not a book *about* the idiosyncratic Fire Walker; it is a multimodal, multidimensional monument to a uniquely African custom that is encountered on the streets of Johannesburg.

Some images, which accompany the bibliographic entry, show the above texts in contextual relation to the book, its slipcase as well as the producers' wider project reflected in the 'Associated Articles' section. The text is also fully recorded in the *Reference Note* field. This provides an example of what Ekdahl (1999:247) might refer to as an "amplified" bibliographic record. Our catalogue entry and denotative fields of images and texts attempt to reflect the project's affective content. Without these diverse signifiers the essential quality of the 'art project' slips its moorings and the perfunctory entry for the 'book' remains.
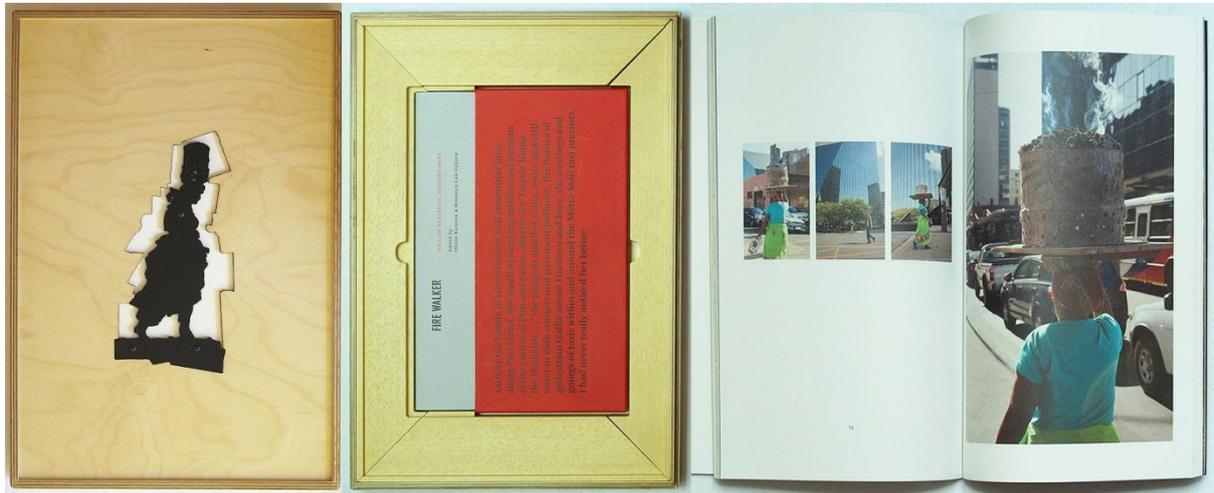

Fig.3. William Kentridge & Gerard Marx. *Fire Walker*. 2011. 452 x 357mm (box). Relief print, lithograph, collage, metal inlay in wood. Edition: #27/40. Photograph: David Paton.

Exemplar three (Fig.4)

Bidmat [Prayer Mat] (2010)
Stephan Erasmus

Erasmus's fastidious approach to his making practice is evident in this work. Every Bible verse in the Old Testament containing the word 'land' has been collected and printed in consideration of the complex relationship between physical and 'God-given' land in peculiarly South African, religious, political and personal terms. The verses of text have been cut into strips and woven into the form of a scroll with cotton thread. Every woven section contains five lines of text. Its self-conscious and reflexive characteristics, so critical to the larger project which is the artist's book, references the origins of legal and religious texts and the book itself. The scroll's source is the Bible, itself originally constructed from a body of other, independent scrolls, thus here, the scroll becomes a self-conscious meditation on the history of its own form. Furthermore, the scroll problematises the notion of a book predicated upon the aura of the codex's navigability and structural integrity as well as its conventions of legibility in the reading/viewing of text/image relationships. Not only must the bibliographic entry find a way of acknowledging the affective elements so critical to the very heart of artists' books existential meanings we have also attempted to describe the manner in which this affect is delivered, i.e. through the documentation of key characteristics of such works' bookness: self-consciousness and reflexivity. Finally, *Bidmat* is an extremely fragile document requiring a box in order to protect it as well as facilitate its physical position and location on a library shelf.
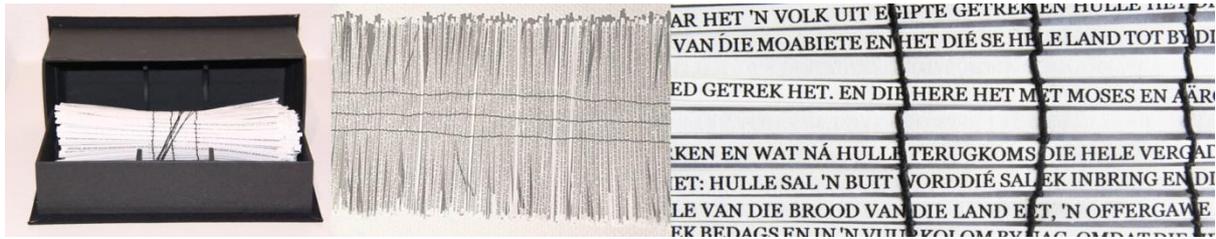
Fig.4. Stephan Erasmus. *Bidmat* [*Prayer Mat*]. 2010. 272mm. Fabriano paper, digital print and cotton thread. Edition: #1/5. Photograph: David Paton.

Conclusion

Our wild bibliographic dream has proven to be both hugely successful whilst at the same time an utter failure. If a meaningful catalogue of South African artists' books is to be matured then the affective qualities of the field and their self-conscious and reflexive elements too require documentation so as not to let the 'art' slip its moorings and float away from the denotative, perfunctory information for a 'book'. Artists' books are not merely carriers of information in convenient form. If, as Drucker (1995:161) states, the artist's book must demonstrate its intrinsic "bookness"; be conscious of and/or challenge its own book identity; be politically charged and/or socially critical; be artistically avant-garde; and represent the artist, it seems critical for all our bibliographies to help reflect the very qualities which differentiate these objects from mere books.

The writing of this paper and its associated research into similar concerns by others has prompted a response. In particular we have begun to leverage Thurmann-Jajes' (2010) *Primary* and *Secondary Subforms* and *Genres* in new and revised fields in the bibliographic record of the database in order to define, categorise and describe South African artists' books more fully. During the latter stages of writing this paper, Dennis and I reformed the following fields on the website so as to amplify the data:

In *Category* we list one of the following:
- South African Artist's Book
- South African Digital Artist's Book
- South African Artist's Zine (including magazines, and newspapers)
- South African Book Object
- South African Book-shaped Object
- South African Broadside
- Any other basic category where it arises

In *Type* we are now able to isolate bindings and structures such as:
- Codex
- Scroll
- Leporello
- Pop-up
- Pop-down
- Tunnel Book
- Folio
- Set of cards, etc.

In *Sub-type* we have responded to Thurmann-Jajes' description of the artist's role in the publication, narrativised as, for example:

- Artist as sole producer
- Artist as concept and item producer with one other (typesetter)
- Artists and multiple producers
- Artist as illustrator, etc.

Most importantly, in our new field *Theme(s)* we respond to Thurmann-Jajes' *Genre*s, Meyers & Meyers', Stover's and others' calls for an 'expanded field' in which we are able to include narratives describing characteristics of artists' books as reflexive, self-conscious, structural and materially interpretive acts which help liberate their content, for example:
- Self-conscious and reflexive forms delivering socio-familial commentary on violence (as describes *Antibody*)
- Complex combination of texts and images in socio-economic commentary associated with inner-city Johannesburg (as describes *Firewalker*)
- Reflexive historical book form via repurposed biblical texts for personal socio-political & religious contemplation & commentary (as describes *Bidmat*).

These four fields have been explicitly completed for the three exemplars presented in this paper. The task of completing this empathetically as Clarke (2013:153) suggests, by spending "countless hours with the books, turning their pages, learning their tricks, feeling their materials, examining their story lines" as Stover (2005:46-47) describes, still lies ahead.

Acknowledgments

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