

The Aegean Sea

The Compulsion to Make Artist Books

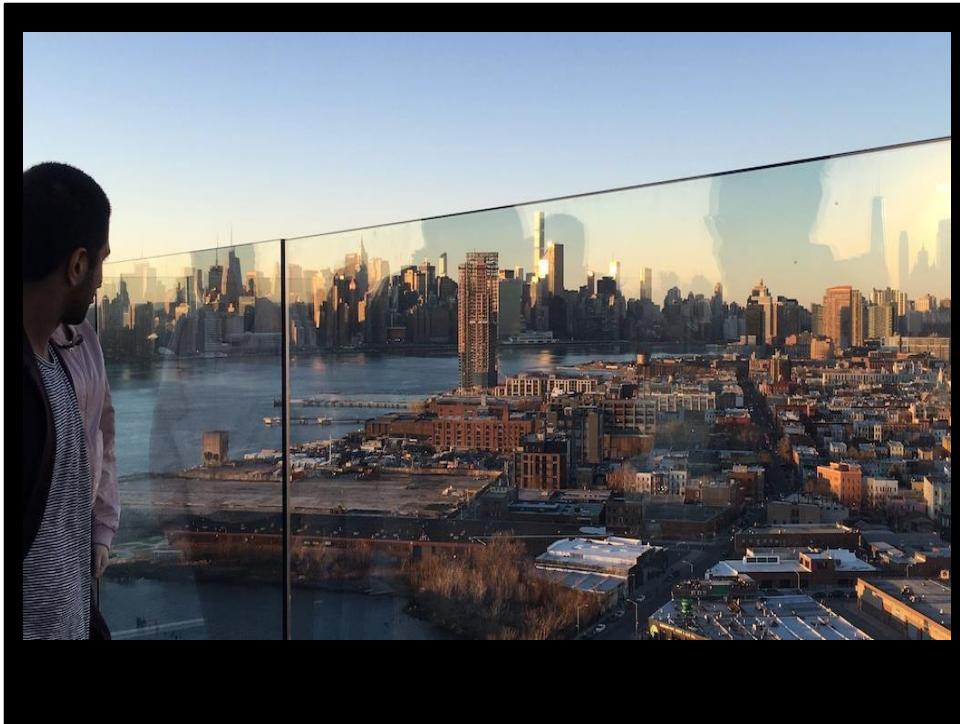
by

Robbin Ami Silverberg

My Book Bubble



Some years ago, I found a drawing I had made when I was a kid. Coloring on construction paper, I created my fantasy world: The Book Bubble. I really always loved books...but imagine: a book fountain? --A book tree? ... not to mention the Enjoyment room & Brown Study both in the attic... Did I already know then that I wanted to spend my life living with books: designing, producing, and dreaming them? -- That my concept would be a built space, a place of retreat? I must say in some ways this image that I made was prescient -- as you will see in one moment. (Not to mention I notice that I seem to have invented the computer (notice the "Book a Screen")!!!!!!



For the past 28 years, I have lived in Northern Brooklyn across the East River from Manhattan.

from my rooftop



Greenpoint/ Williamsburg – which is not green -- -- Is a mixed industrial neighborhood

on Dobbin Street



That is being not so quietly infiltrated by hipsters.

Dobbin Mews



Here's Dobbin Mews: It is a 19th C. horse's stables that we have converted to our our home in what was the hayloft, & a cluster of studios for ourselves and a group of artists & artisans.

Gardens with the blue studio building



Despite the urban façade, behind the gate of the Dobbin Mews compound is a green haven in a courtyard...

We have 2 gardens filled with flowers, herbs, berries vegetables, and a range of plants for papermaking purposes

...including my paper mulberry trees for Eastern papermaking.

Dobbin Books



The Studio is divided onto 2 levels: Upstairs is Dobbin Books:
my studio for art-making, writing, bookbinding, printing,
whatever it takes - for- the book production.

Dobbin Mill



Downstairs is the paper mill.

Dobbin Mill is a fully equipped paper studio: with a divine 50 ton hydraulic press (the couching table becomes the bottom platen), forced air dryer for drying papers, fiber storage,

Hollander beater



paper moulds



, a Hollander beater for fiber preparation in a separate beater room & with a good deal of other equipment and tools



Book studio, gardens, paper-millSo you see, it is my 'Book Bubble'!!

Reading Hot Spots in New York City, 2017



Most of my artwork takes the form of solo artist books
in very small edition sizes (typically 5, 10, or 15).

I've been making artist books since the early 80's – as I see them as potent vehicles
for my ideas.

Installation Art

Simulacrum



Anamnesis video
in Samorin, Slovakia



The 2nd area of my artwork is site-specific paper installations, which I consider to be artist books in space.

Kakistocracy

with Kim Berman



Titok (secret)

with 22 secretists



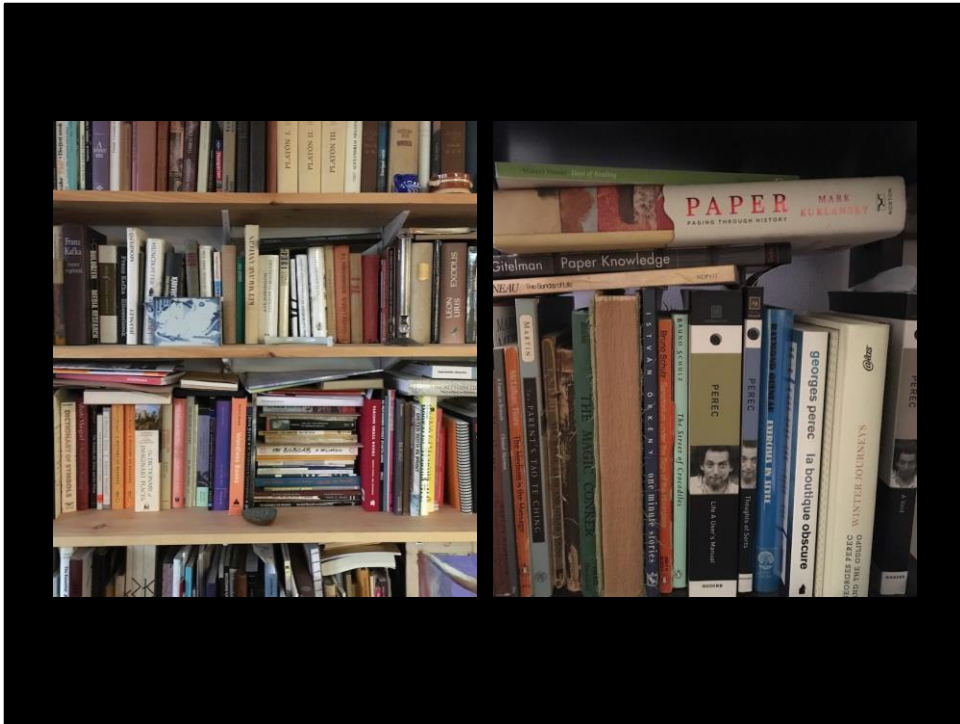
The third focus: is collaborative artist books (with artists from other countries and other disciplines):

Since 1991, I have published circa 40 collaborations.

The two books shown in this slide: On the right: Titok is a 3-dimensional maze that maps secrets: 27 interactive cubes can be played with & explored, while listening to a sound score, *Music for Boxes*. And, on the left *Kakistocracy*, an artist book collaboration with Jbg artist Kim Berman, produced just last month at Dobbin Mill; (and completed in this past week) -- about our 2 dysfunctional political systems that have produced the likes of Trump & Zuma.

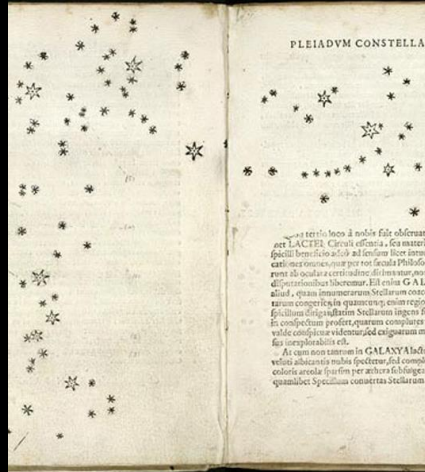


Today: I'd like to explore what might seem to be a simple idea: the compulsion to MAKE artist books.



To better understand this compulsion, I spent several months going through my bookshelves, re-visiting old favorites, renewing bonds with writers, thinkers & visionaries... a tasty array of artist books but also the writings of the likes of: Alberto Manguel, Guy Debord, George Perec,

Mallarmé, 'Restricted Action' in *Divigations*



Here are some thoughts found on my bookshelves:

Stephane Mallarmé described the book as a series of relations: “Hymn, harmony and joy, a pure cluster grouped together in some shining circumstances, tying together the relations among everything”¹

Mallarmé, “RESTERICTED ACTION” IN DIVIGATIONS, p, 215

Dick Higgins' essay 'A BOOK'



Dick Higgins wrote: "...a book, in its purest form, is a phenomenon of space and time and dimensionality that is unique unto itself. Every time we turn the page, the previous page passes into our past and we are confronted by a new world."

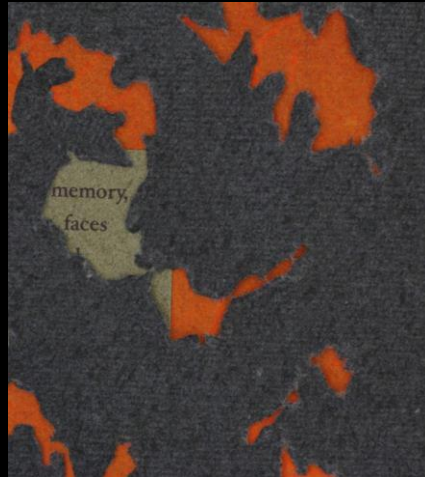
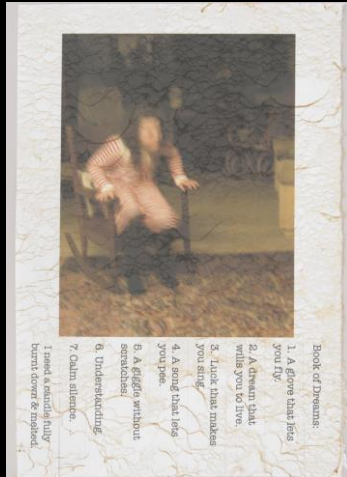
".... The book is, then, the container of a provocation. We open it and are provoked to match our horizons with those implied by (what is within)..."

book brush



Stephen Bury states more matter of factly that 'The book is the residence of the idea'.... And: that it is 'What we expect a book to do: what a book is and what it is not.'

WHAT IS AN ARTIST'S' BOOK'S HAECCITY? ITS ESSENCE?



All these texts pleased me to read. At the same time, I felt no closer to why I make books / why I am obsessed with artist books.

WHAT IS AN ARTIST'S' BOOKS' HAECCITY? ITS ESSENCE?



I can't help but take a detour here that might further explain why I pose this question:

We all know what a document is. It is a thing (most often we think of it as a written or printed paper) that can be used to furnish evidence or information.

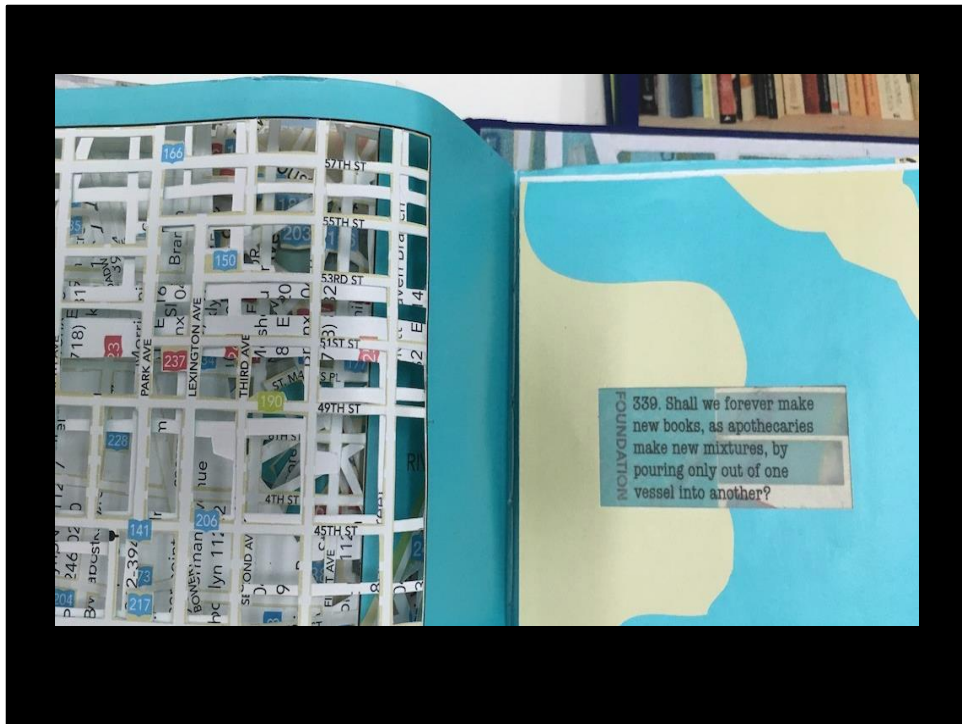
But, In 1951 French librarian, Suzanne Briet, made an unusual proposal:



that an antelope running in the wild would not be a document, while an antelope in a zoo would certainly be one. Briet based this definition on the idea that the zoo specimen has been reduced by the act of caging it – to just that: a specimen. Just as documents are objects that are intended as evidence and processed and retained as such.



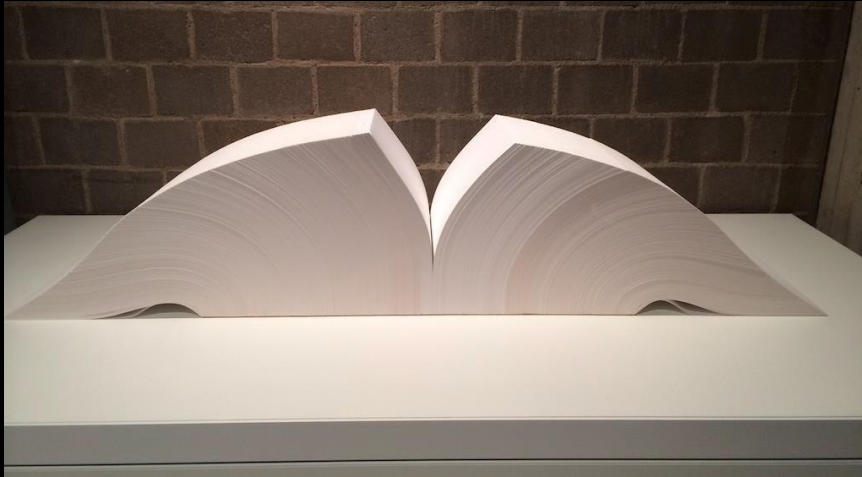
If a book can be a document, it is evident that we humans entangle the genre and the thing – the media and the format.... This line of reasoning is part of a long tradition of entangling the material form of an expression with its linguistic (or creative) meanings (as Lisa Gitelman put it).



Returning to the artist book, understanding its haeccity could clarify why we make them.

Or, I shall take another tact and pose that the very act of making an artist book or being an actor in making them, can perhaps clarify its essence.

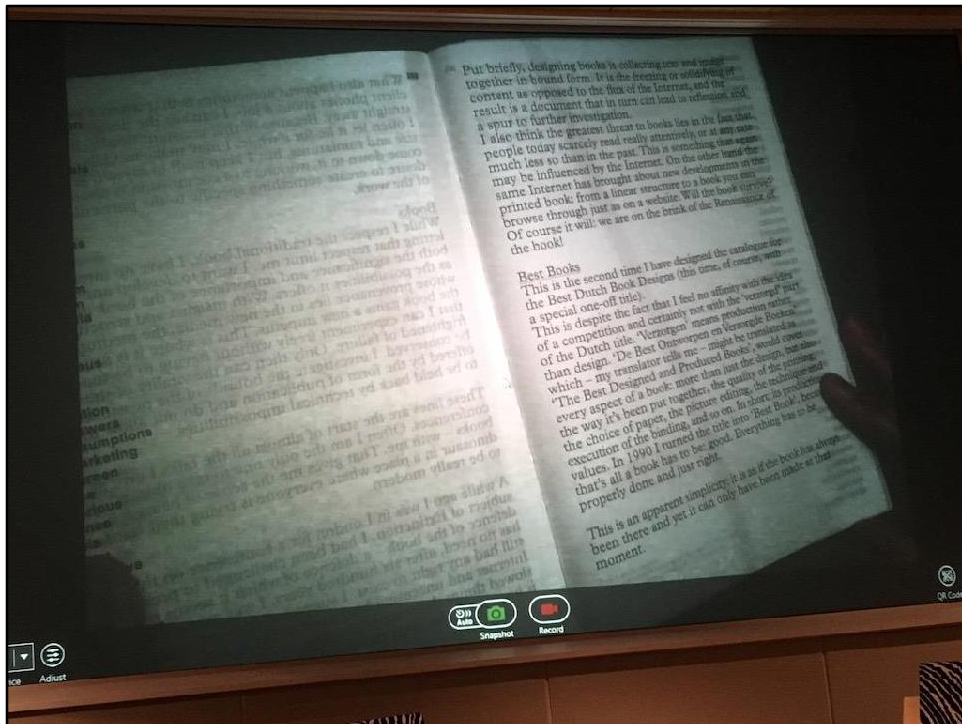
From this perspective, an artist book is a tabula rasa,
on which the artist could experiment,
exploring a range of notions:



From this perspective, an artist book is a tabula rasa, on which the artist could experiment, exploring a range of notions:

of seriality, sequence, & narrative, the relationship between text & image, the fragmentation caused by image/text interaction, language as sound & image, reading in real time, reading as performance, the page as arena, the subjective nature of reading, The density of the page, the absence / presence – of information, The transformation from readers to lookers

-- to name a few concepts that are part of this exploration called artist book.



Today I will share with you my thoughts on just a few of its properties that draw me to this wonderful object.

In doing so, I will highlight TEN books by other artists that have filled me with awe & astonishment. Several of them are examples of artist books that have been my guides in the struggle to make better art. To make artist books.

Book performance at Pratt



Jack Ginsberg in his library



We are all here at *Booknesses* to consider the artist book – as makers, as collectors, as academics & students of this wonderful field – I must delve deeper, so please indulge me:

Materiality & Process

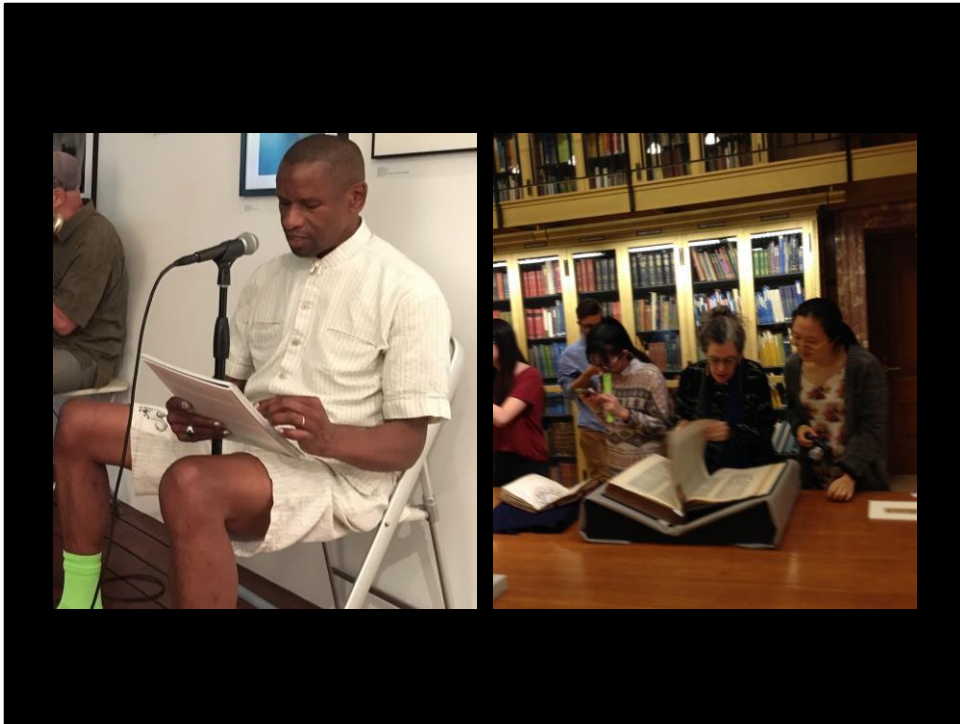


When I consider what aspect of books feels essential to me as a maker, their materiality and the haptic experience of reading certainly come to the fore. A book is obviously an object – The act of reading is more than our eyes following a black dot matrix on a white ground: it is also of course, the physical act of page turning, handling and holding the book itself.



“...our intellectual and imaginative relationships with books have been mediated by their held-in-the-hand physicality,” wrote Shirley Dent in The Guardian.

Gyorgy Kepes, wrote in 1949: “A book has weight size, thickness and tactile qualities, qualities that are handled by the hand, as its optical form is handled by the eye... The book can be conceived in the same way as a handle of a tool or a utensil../. and with perfect control.p.8



Finally, as Gary Frost pointed out: “The haptic concern also follows from the peculiar essence of the book as hand held art. Books are only read at arms’ length... This is a legacy of writing as a picture of speech and its early use as a handheld prompt.” P. 3 in Bonefolder

Bruno Munari's *I Pre-Libri*, 1980



A wonderful primer of sorts that explores a vast array of sensory experiences in artist books is Bruno Munari's *Pre-Libri* (which means *Pre-Books*, in Italian). Published in 1980, it consists of 12 booklets made of a range of materials: an assortment of papers & cardboard, wood, cloth, sponge, felt, plastic, wool, raffia, & string.

Cover of I PreLibri



Munari teaching through kinesthetic learning



Munari explored the ideas of what is a book – focusing on pre-literate children in particular, as his readers, for, as he said: ...it might be better if children began to get to know books when they were three, to find out about these instruments of culture or poetic games”.

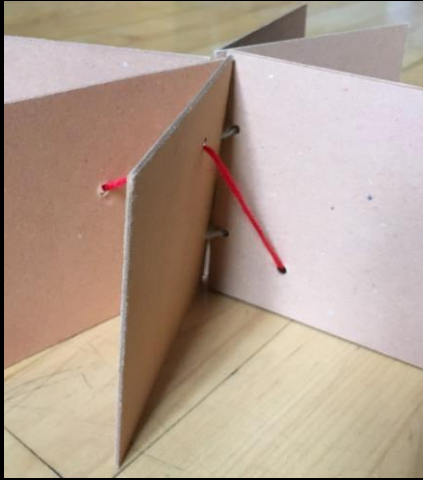
Munari playing with his books



Experiencing Pre-Libri is a true joy for the adult: seemingly simple and direct: Each pamphlet introduces an idea or several ideas of what a book is and can do; It is brilliantly designed: each booklet functions as a chapter that builds on and references the ideas about book in the previous volumes. In other word, a sequence.

Munari's commentary is worth quoting; We could design a series of objects to look like books but which would all be different according to the information they gave out, whether visual, tactile, audible, thermal, or material, but all the same size as the volumes in an encyclopedia and with as much information within."

1st booklet in PreLibri



Book 91 by Keith Smith



Look at the 1st booklet: it introduces the function of a book as an object that contains an idea – represented by a bright red string that runs through holes in the cardboard page but standing out in its rich color or importance (think what Keith Smith will later do with this very idea in his wondrous Book 91!). What brilliance – and simplicity -- declaring the existence of sequential ideas in a book through the physicality of red thread!

Books 9 & 10



Books 5, 7, 12



And the sequence of information: The red will show up again in book #2, the holes in book #5, #7, & #12, the thread binding in #9 &10.

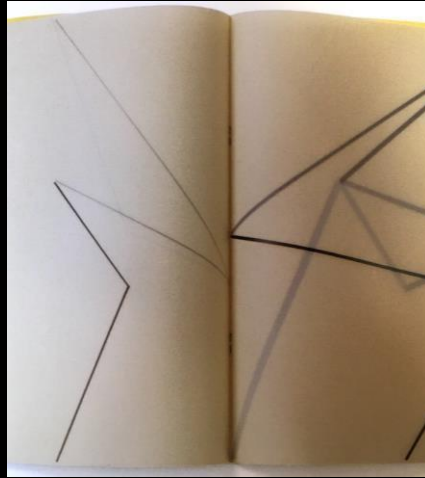
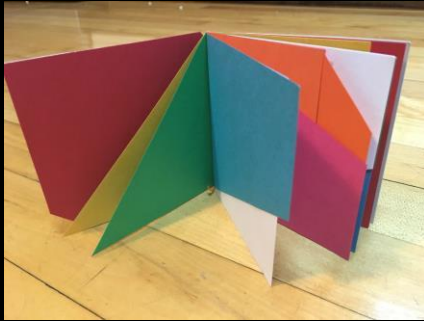


As we 'read' or progress through these 'chapters', we learn more: about the recto/verso of a double page spread, of the centerfold of a book, of vertical and horizontal reading, of rhythmic sequencing, etc.



“LIBRO”, which means BOOK in Italian, is printed on the front and back covers – such that regardless how each booklet is held & handled it is upright when read from either direction. “LIBRO”, is the only word found in Pre-Libri. Thus without linguistic language, every detail has been considered to maximize the reading, the experience of ‘book’.

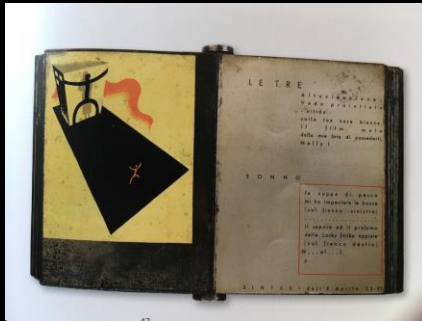
libro Illeggibile” or ‘the unreadable book’



Munari was fully committed to pushing the boundaries of how we experience a book, whether it was to choosing non-traditional materials like tin pages or committing to a series he called ‘the unreadable book’:

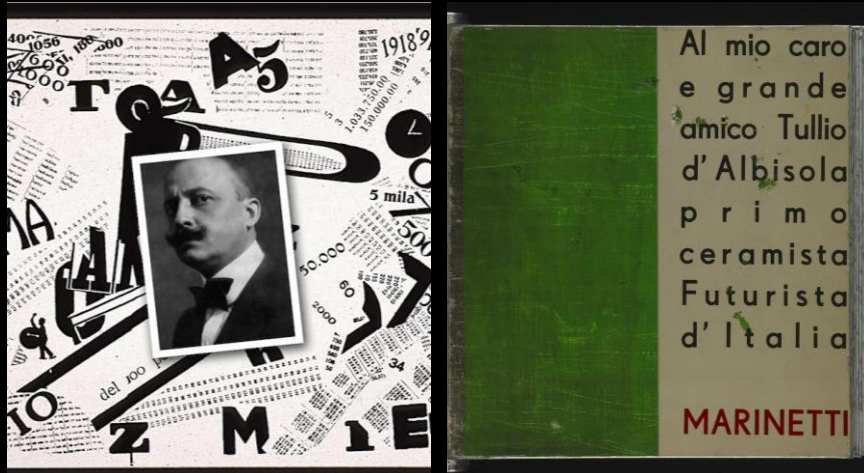
“to see if its possible to use the materials that make up a book (excluding the text as a visual language. ... can you communicate visually and tactily only by means of the editorial production of a book/ Or can the book as object communicate something independently of the printed works...’

L'anguria Lyriac, 1934 (*The Lyrical Watermelon*)



Munari's long life spanned most of the 20th century. He started to work on books as objects in 1929 & lived & worked into the 1990's, publishing numerous artist books & children books in his life-time. He was a leading exponent of the Futurist group in Milan, illustrating *l'anguria lyriac* (*The Lyrical Watermelon*) in 1934, the 2nd of the 2 tin-plated books designed by Tullio d'Albisola. I will now look at the 1st of these tin books:

FT Marinetti, *Parole in Libertá*, 1932



Futurist Filippo Marinetti's *Parole in Libertá*, made in 1932, is an astounding example of both non-traditional materials and multi-sensory information: It is a metal book, which employs a lithographic technique that was used for biscuit tins and store signage. Thus it entirely consists of tin sheets, a true book for the Machine Age.

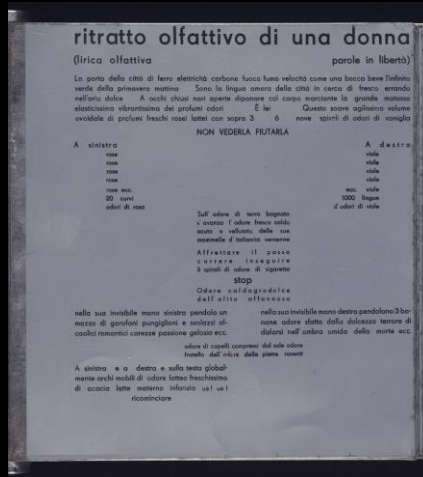


Its content was the free-form visual poetry of the Futurists -- Marinetti liberated words by destroying syntax, eliminating adjectives & adverbs, abolishing punctuation, using verbs in the infinitive, employing onomatopoeia.

Marinetti's texts were printed on separate pages, with d'Albisola's visual designs, highlighting a line or phrase on the verso – This layout meant that a simultaneous visual comparison was impossible.

Cover with tubular spine

olfactory poem



The full title translated into English is “Words In Freedom: Olfactory, Tactile, and Thermal”.

The concept of the Tactile seems self-evident; I somehow could imagine the Thermal (due to the metal plates) -- but despite Marinetti’s fabulous poem/performance included in the book: Olfactory Portrait of a Woman --- I kept wondering about the ‘olfactory’ portion – since it seemed not a part of the reader’s experience --- until NYPL librarian Alvaro Lazo explained to me a fascinating detail:

The book has a tubular spine, which holds metal wire spindles that attach to the 15 tin pages. That is structural information. But the tubular spine had another function: it was meant to be filled with machine oil (hence the olfactory component)!

Parole in Libertá was read as literature,
experienced as visual art and performed as drama.

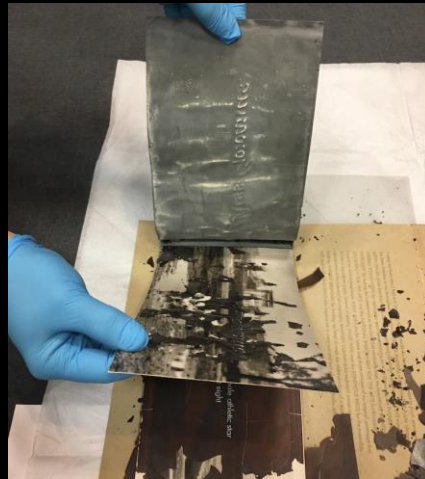


Parole in Liberta was read as literature, experienced as visual art, and performed as drama.

Interior Scroll by Carolee Schneeman



Miss Gowanus by Meg Belichik



Leszek Brogowski, when discussing touching in reading said that: “At the end of the neurological process known as reading, associations created connections between the meaning of a work and images that find responses in the sensory cortex, where by forming associations with **sound, touch and smell more feelings can be aroused.**”
P. 23

Paul Heimbach



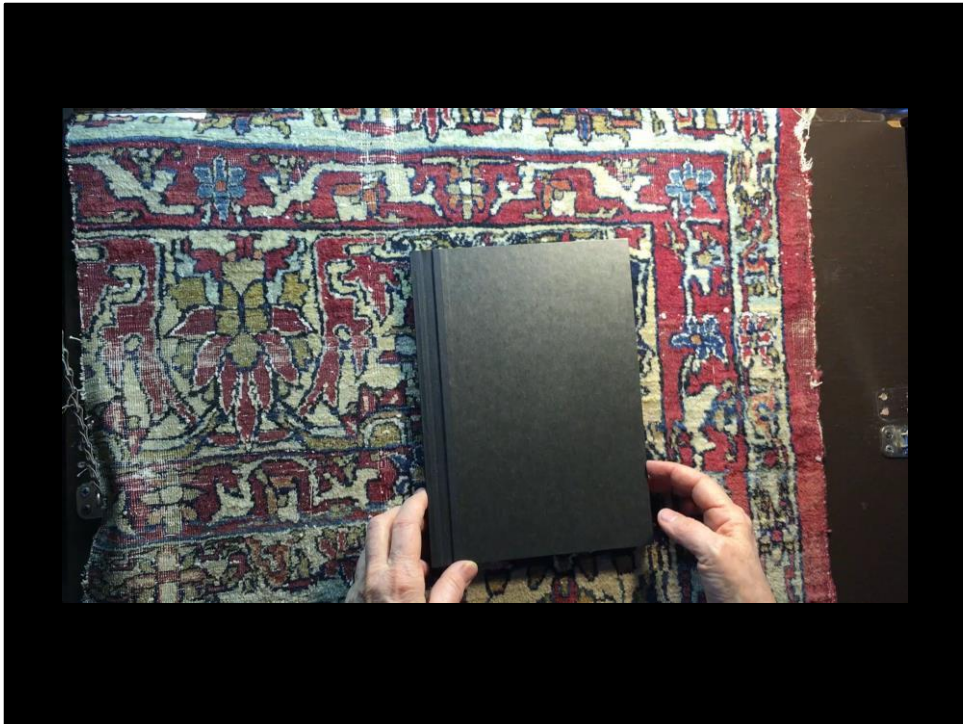
Monotone, 1990



Another multi-sensory experience comes from German book artist, Paul Heimbach. He focused much of his career on the nature of series based on strict rules as starting points. His stunning books after 1997 explored color and its conceptual potential, but *Monotone* (1990) is from an all together different focus: It consists of plain grey/black board covers, black half-linen binding, and all the pages are of acetate – all of them entirely blank.

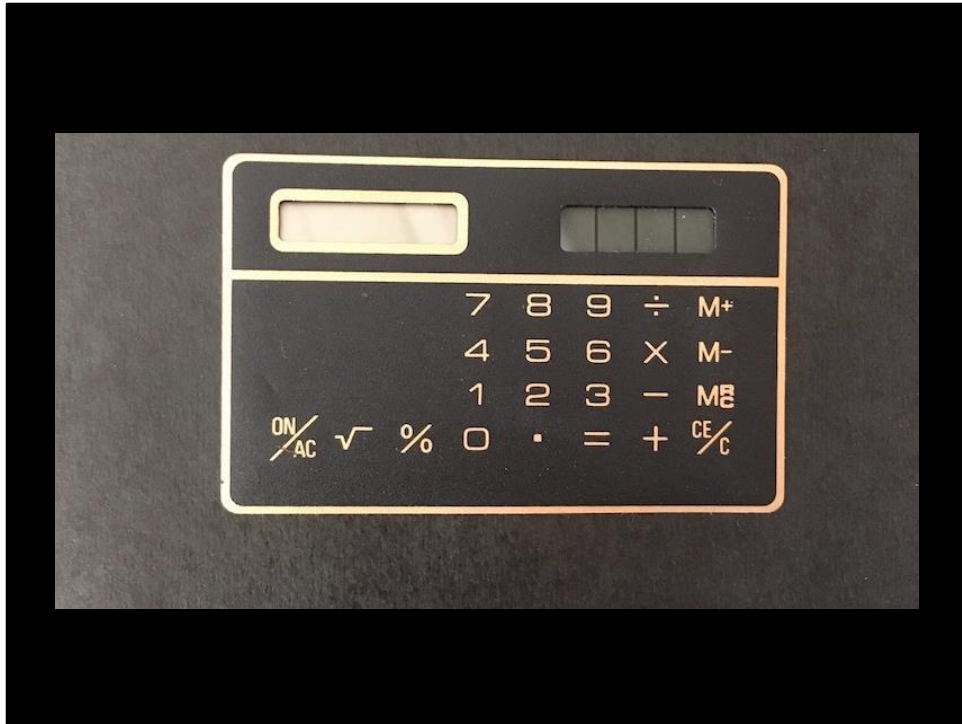


One moves through the pages quickly – in a Zen trance, as one starts to notice the reflections on the surfaces, the softness of the material, the sheen, etc. – all the while, wondering what and why. Remember the pages are completely blank. And slowly VERY SLOWLY, the reader becomes aware of something new, something remarkable and unexpected in the vocabulary & language of books:



As the reader turns pages, one begins to hear a subtle high-pitched tone. And as one continues to turn the pages it seems to grow louder ever so slightly and even vary in pitch—getting louder and higher as we page through the book.

Now, ever more curious and connected we ‘read’ the book – turning pages and listening more & more attentively.



Embedded in the back cover, we discover a solar battery: this ever-changing tone is created by this battery as light is transmitted progressively through the over decreasing density of the acetate pages. WOW!

The 'read' of "Monotone" is not
visual: it is tactile and aural.

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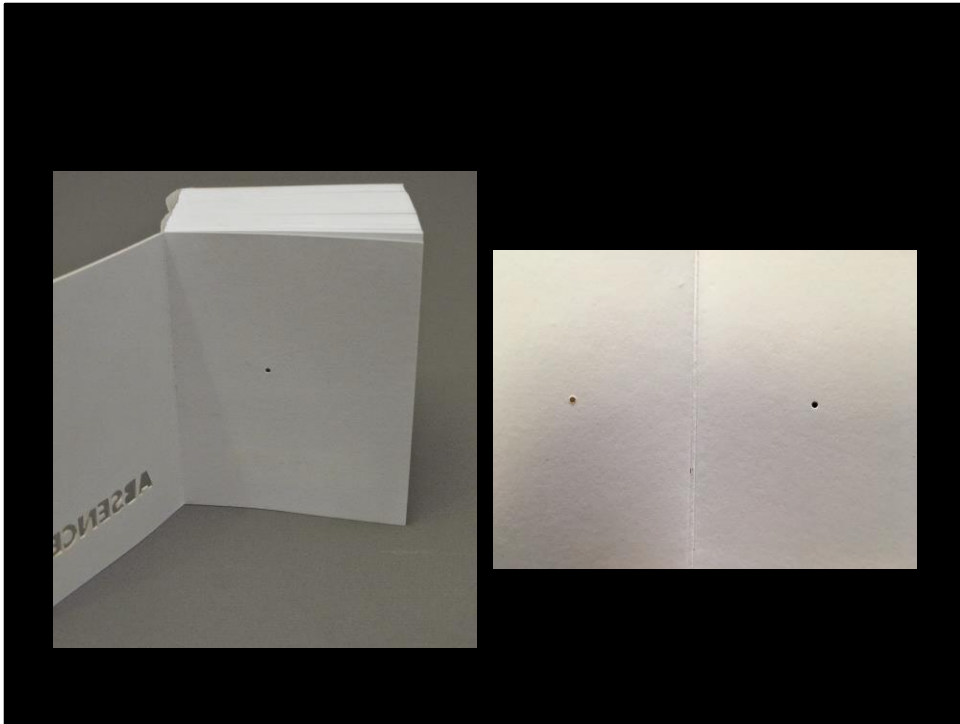
As Buzz Spector said: The whole book can only be known if we add the knowledge of the hand, ear and nose to that of the eye.

Absence by J. Meejin Yoon, 2004



Certain artist books successfully maximize this demand for the tactile experience:

4. Architect J. Meejin Yoon made *Absence* in 2004. It is a physical book: a chunky heavy cube of white with the title die cut out of its cover. (in a font that I hate – in an otherwise wonderful book). The entire book is white.

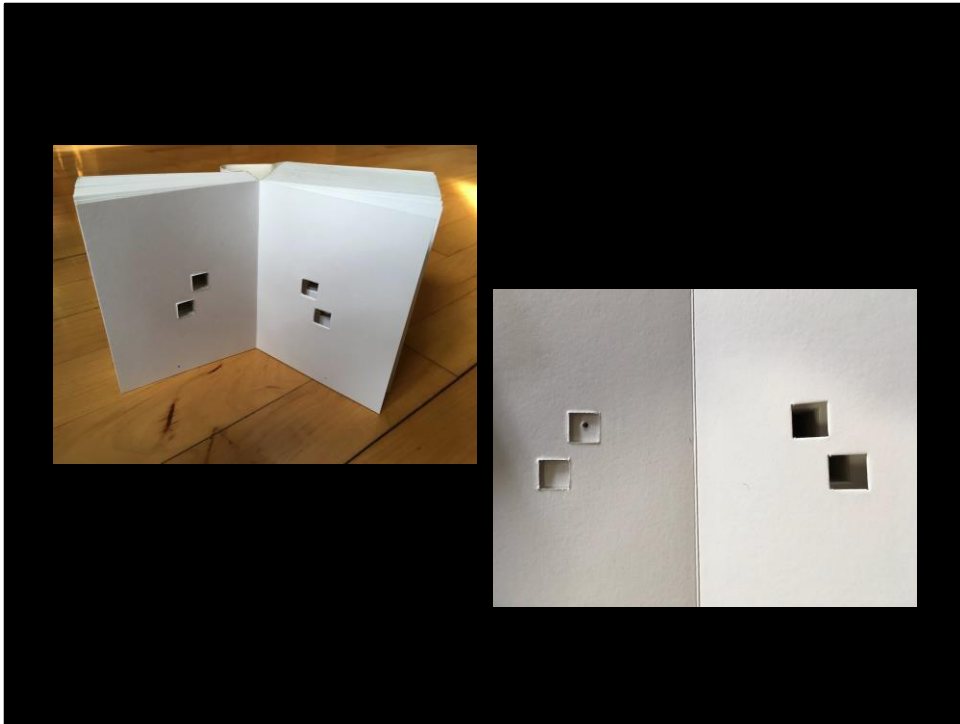


The first spread reveals a small hole in the card stock page, followed by a double page spread with a single hole piercing each side.

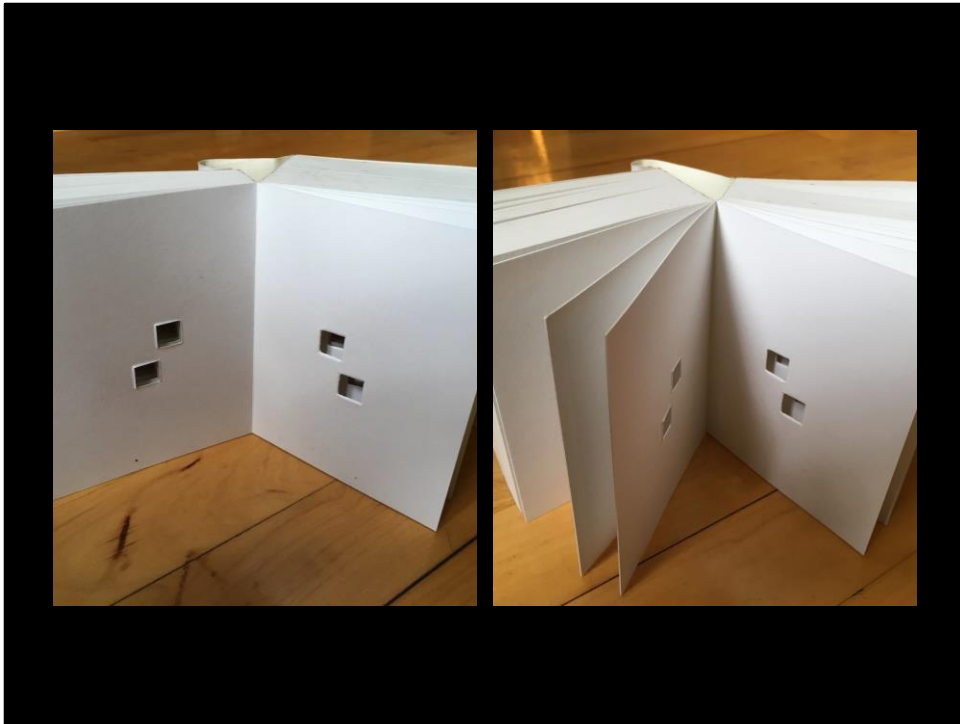


One's brain immediately presumes that 3 holes will appear on the next pages – only to find the same view as the previous one.

This continues for several spreads. 'Reading', or more accurately said, page turning, naturally speeds up as one looks for more. I notice the sound of reading: the lighter clap on one side and the thud on the other, as cardboard pages are turned.

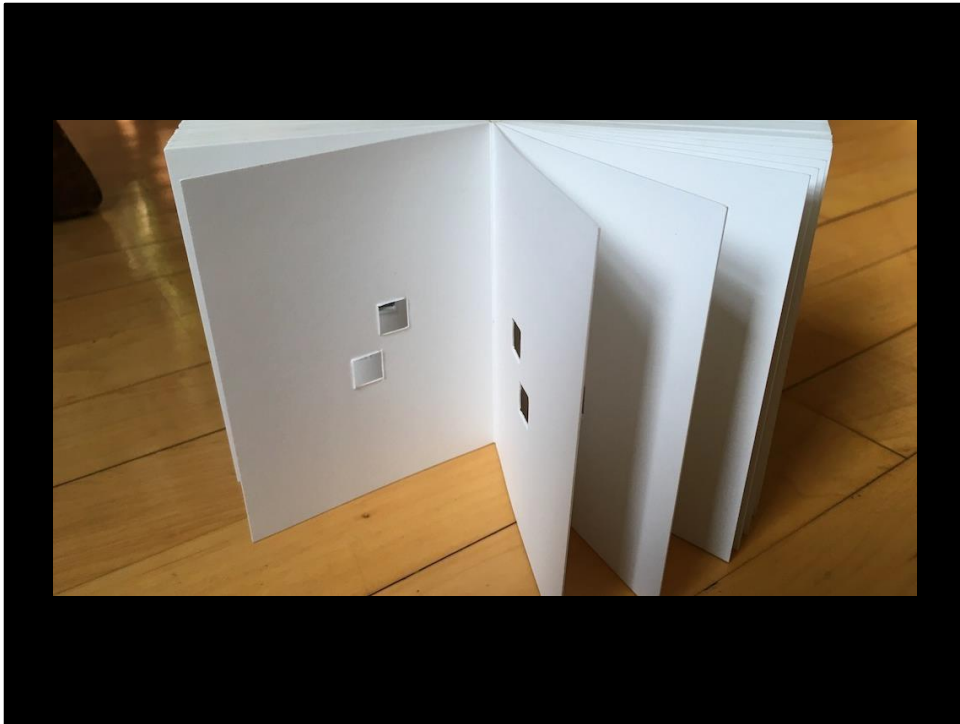


About the point when many of us would give up & put the book away, there is a change: 2 square holes are die-cut from the page – framing the small round holes we already have seen too many times. CHANGE!

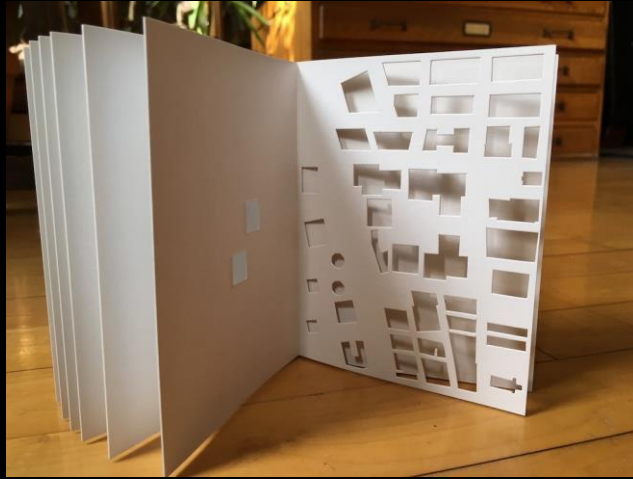


Our interest is peaked momentarily. And yet, the read gets harder & harder as page after page is repeatedly the 2 square holes, at a diagonal from each other but unvarying in the layout.

Is this a minimalist work? Must I look at this white endless white and 2 square holes again & again & again? Yes it is about 'absence' and yes, there are these holes and there is lots of heavy white but really?

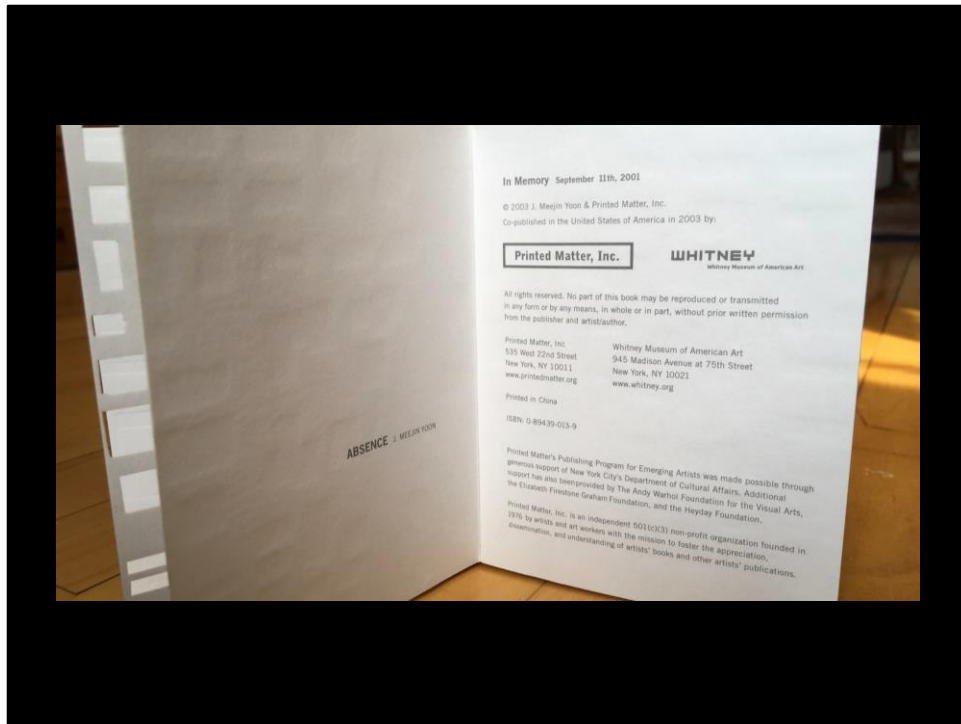


Or is the content here more theoretical? About what Gary Frost referred to as the asymmetry of the symmetrical codex: "As the leaves change places with each other the right page becomes the left page as the clock of content goes forward. Two hands, each acting alone, hold the book and turn the page. This initially simple circumstance of symmetry/asymmetry of the body and book is opened to endless permutations of artists' books". P 4



Many a reader would quit. Or skip to the end.

The penultimate page is strange: a pattern of cut-outs unfamiliar albeit different than the rest of the book. Curious and a bit of a relief.



And then I turn the final page: and read in memory of September 11, 2001 and I am slammed with the realization that this book is displaying that which is NOT there: the twin towers and the 110 pages I've just 'read' represent the 110 floors of the buildings that came down. The pile of tiny holes is the void of the antenna /And: the 2 piles of cut out squares are the voids of the 2 buildings.



And I am left with a chunk of white cardboard, the sadness of the absence, and a pit in my stomach (reminiscent of the same feeling I had when I stood on my rooftop and saw the towers come down...).



But I must ask myself: would this work be as effective if it was not a book? If one viewed it as graffiti, or a painting, or a sculpture on a pedestal, and read its title on a label on the wall to its side? I think not. The process of looking through, searching for, not understanding, wondering about its simplicity, hearing the clap thud, repeatedly & the sounds only changing as they reverse to thud clap as the recto increases and verso receded.



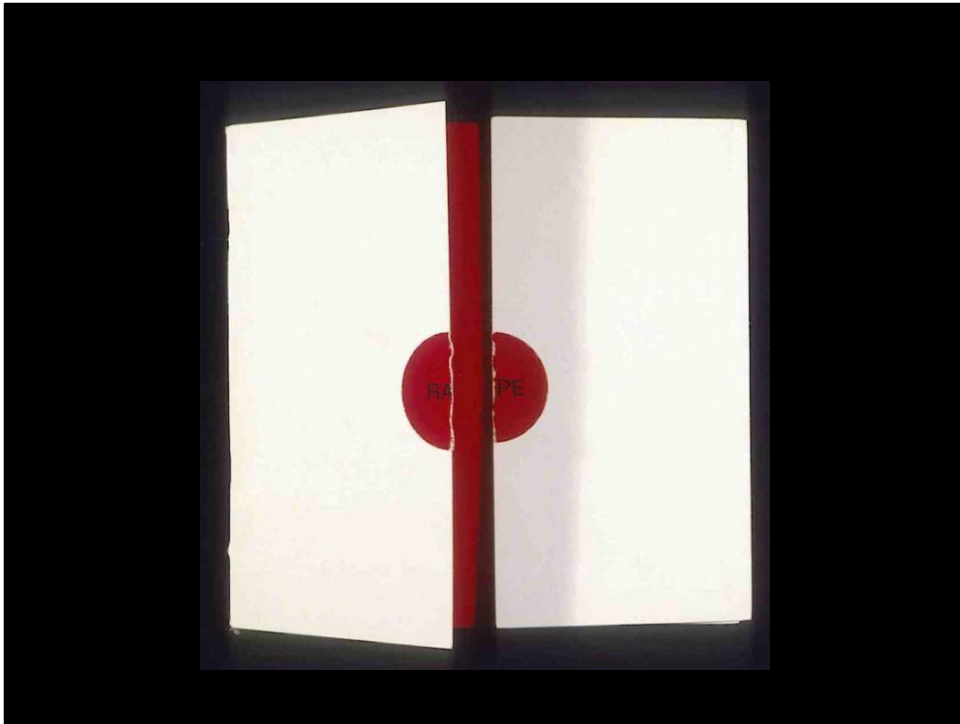
And don't forget, we must also add in some guilt to the equation – guilt from the fact that we felt dismissive of this work when we were looking at it – bored of its nothingness, the guilt because each boring cardboard page in fact represents a floor that used to exist with people who use to exist –...

All that experience is possible only because we are touching the pages, listening to their sounds and processing the meaninglessness of life.

Rape by Suzanne Lacy, 1976

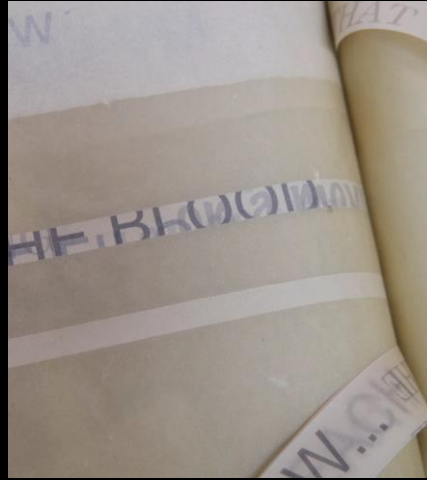


Another artist book where the physical act of reading lump in my throat is *Rape* by Suzanne Lacy. Produced in 1976, this small square-shaped book has a heavy white paper cover -- blank except the bright red waxy seal that holds the book shut -- On it is printed its title "RAPE".

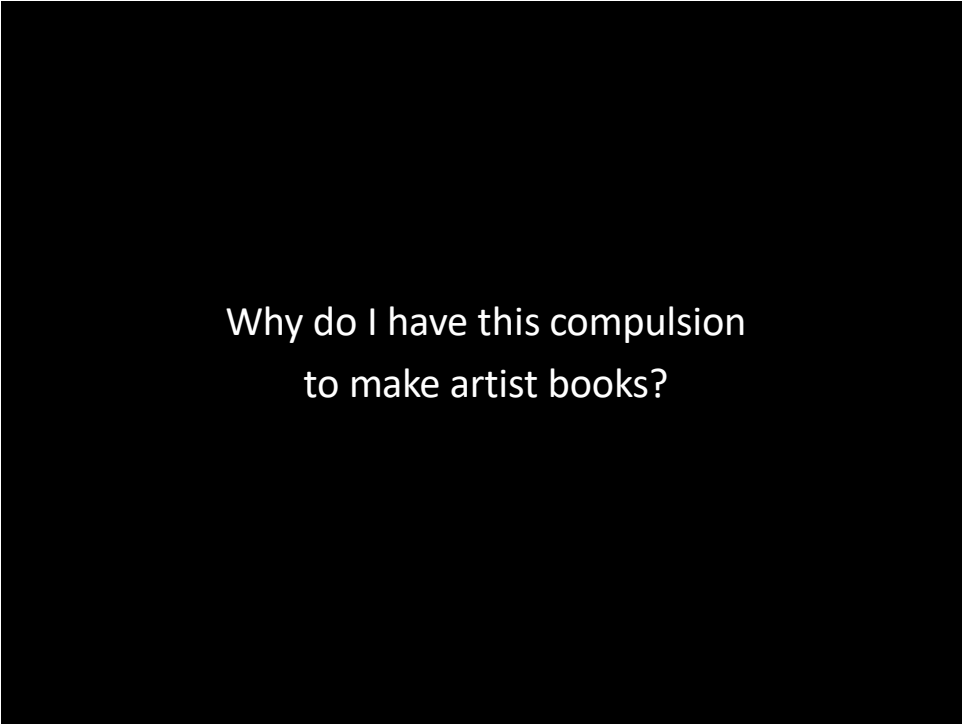


I can clearly remember the first time I saw this book, reaching to grasp it and wondering what was it about and suddenly sickened by the realization that the only way I could read it was to literally and physically rip the seal so I could enter. Metaphor could not have been clearer – as was the virginal choice of paper, so was the message of intactness & violation. (I should say that I've never seen the inside of this book). Gary Frost once said: "...books must be actively read as the hands prompt the mind". This artist book – the hands tear the heart.

After (the Word)
flax & abaca papers with variable text



One compulsion that certainly drives me to make artist books is the desire to offer my readers this complex and dense experience we call reading – the experience of “these very volumes that hook us into the thoughts and ideas of another mind across time and place, (which) are pages bound in the here-and-now.” And, In reality, where the choreography of the read offers so much more!!!



Why do I have this compulsion
to make artist books?

IS THERE MORE TO IT?????

Book artist Maureen Cummins said: "I mourn the death of so many art forms that involve materials that are made entirely or at least in part by hand, such as darkroom photography or letterpress printing. In these art forms, you are working with materials that you touch - actual lead type or processing chemicals. It is a very elemental process, it is close to nature - in some cases we are actually making these materials. As an artist, to not have a connection to where your materials came from becomes very, very abstract and I think, unnatural. Human beings were meant to be connecting with nature, and making things. We're supposed to be using our hands."

Another essential compulsion is then the haptic experience of the Maker:



Another essential compulsion is then the haptic experience of the Maker:



As you might imagine, I love to work with my hands.

Spun into Gold: First 100 Words

hand spun shifu 'pages' with printed text



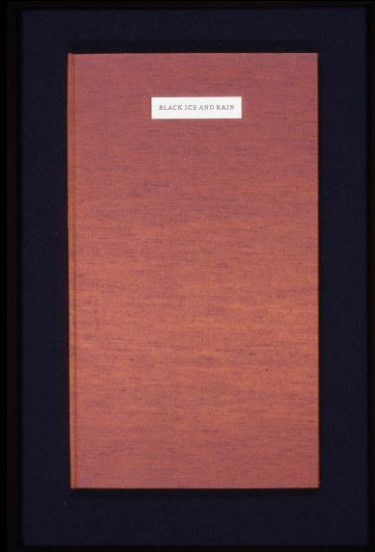
My artwork reflects on my material sensibility as much as the content and issues that comprise its core.

Paper has been my preferred material for more than 30 years and I have explored its potential as a non-neutral substrate in my image making, object making and process.

I am firmly committed to the idea that their materiality should reiterate & reinforce the content –

as the desire to maximize both impact and dialogue has kept me committed to the papermaking process:

Barbara Tetenbaum, *Black Ice & Rain*, 2002



As such I'd like to look at Barbara Tetenbaum's lovely 'fine press book' called *Black Ice & Rain*.



Black Ice & Rain activates both the tactile & auditory experience in its exemplary usage of its material, paper:



By choosing different sorts of papers: a soft Ingres paper was utilized for the letterpress text, and crisp hard blue translucent flax paper sheets interspersed between, where their particular sound – icy and sharp – creates a world that echoes the text.

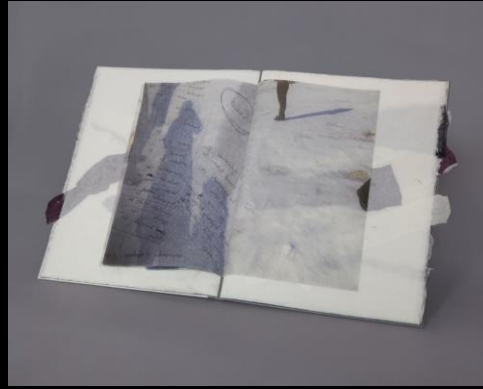
These hard handmade paper sheets have creases and wrinkles – suggestive of the tire marks on ice – referencing the accident and death in the narrative prose.



Uta Schneider pointed: “Hands are what create sound as they move through the pages – reducing tones as they leaf from one page to the next, “Playing the book as if it were an instrument.”

Smell of Winter, 2014

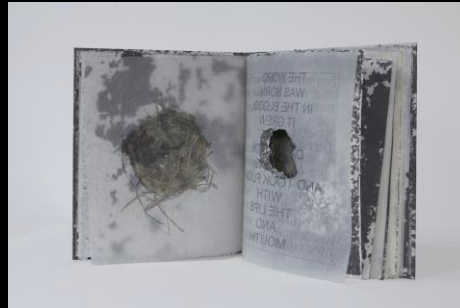
cotton & abaca papers with embedded silks, perfume vial



This is why I make paper – and have done so for so long - not ONLY because I love the material – but more so because I want total control of every and all details that go in to making my artist books, which includes activating the substrate.

Solomon's Wisdom: a fable, a poem a eulogy a dream ten nests & eight holes, 2011

Pulp painted, ripped out & stapled text with inkjet printed translucent papers



I want to make the choice of fiber and its preparation because it determines its tensile strength and shrink, the paper's surface texture, form, & color:

I also can determine its sound, its weight, its opacity or translucency, - each page can have its own shape or watermark

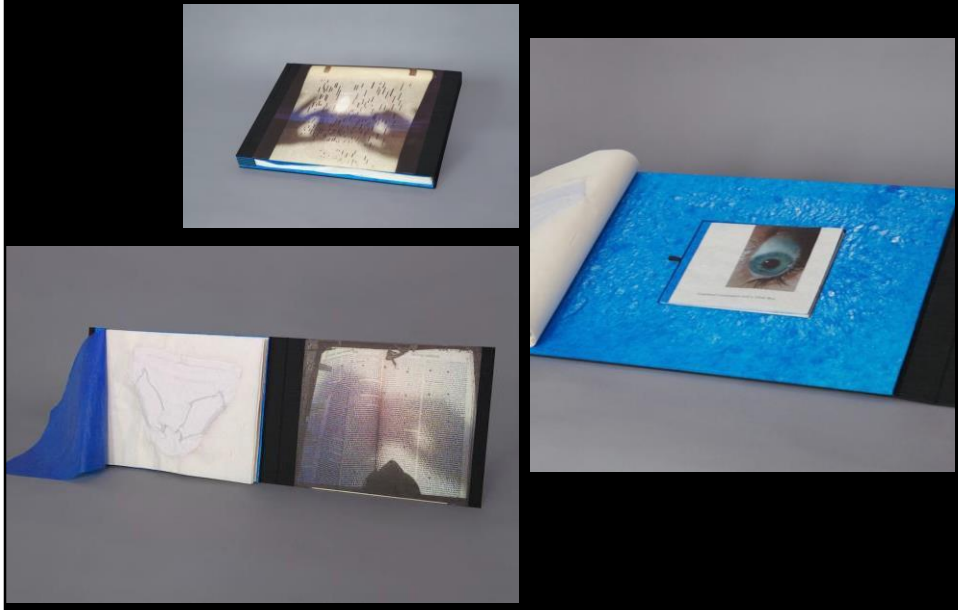
... its an activated substrate and essential partner in the read.

Rondo, 2009



Here in *Rondo*, not only is the choreography of the read defined by typography and its manipulation, and by a complicated back & forth binding structure, but since the text is a sound poem, I chose to make the papers considering both their translucency (to enhance the layered & repeated wording) and their physical sound -- their rattle, which is heard as the pages are turned. (A DVD is also included in the book, with a video of a percussionist performing a musical piece, using my paper as his instrument).

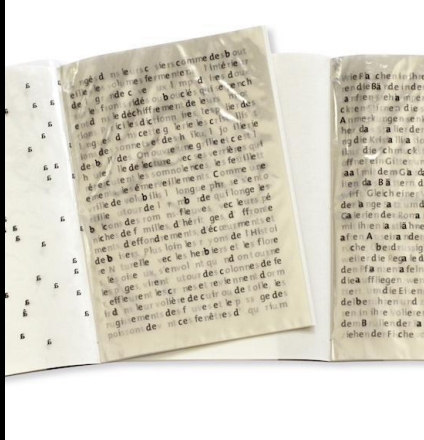
Continual Conversations with a Silent Man, 2014



Certainly, my personal focus on content and ideas, mixed with my commitment to hand craft, along with my obsession with materiality, while still loving to both write & make images...

Making artist books is an obvious mash-up of all these tendencies.

Ines Ketelhodt, Alpha



Peter Schuman, book installation



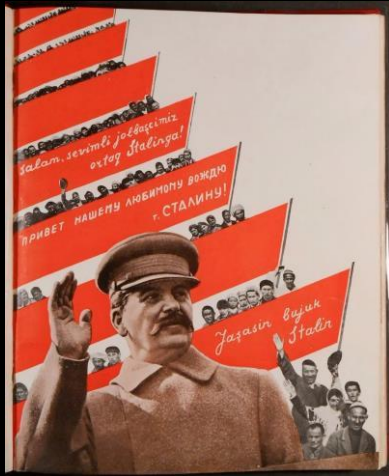
I must point out that all materials & media can similarly activate the read, and I'd like to share my 7th choice of artist books, where it is the printing that evokes the density of meaning:

10 Years in Uzbekistan: A Commemoration
by Ken Campbell, 1994



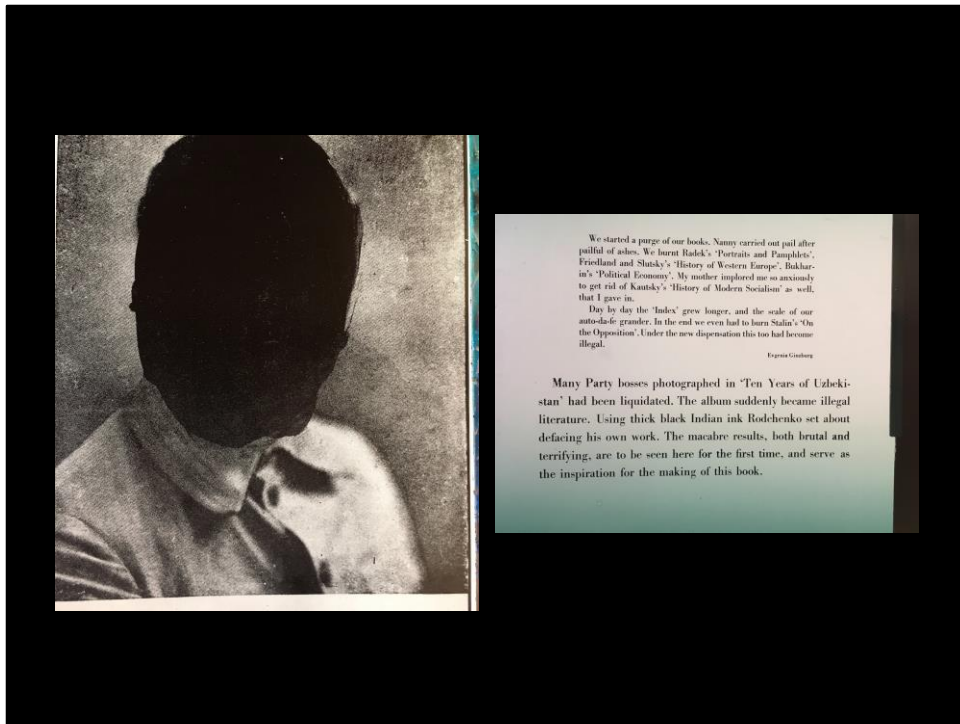
If I was to choose one artist book that was my favorite, or lets make this exercise vaguely feasible, one of a dozen artist books in the last 25 years, I would probably choose *10 Years in Uzbekistan: A Commemoration*, by Ken Campbell published in 1994.

10 Let by Alexander Rodchenko



This book was a collaboration between Campbell & the photographer David King, who wrote in the introduction:

"In 1934 (Alexander) Rodchenko was commissioned by the State Publishing House OGIZ to design a commemorative album entitled 'Ten years of Uzbekistan' celebrating a decade of Soviet rule in that state. ... But in 1937, at the height of the Great Purges, Stalin ordered a major overhaul of the Uzbek leadership and many heads rolled. Many party bosses photographed in 'Ten years of Uzbekistan' had been liquidated. The names of those who had been arrested or had "disappeared" could no longer be mentioned, nor could their pictures be kept without the greatest risk of arrest. Petty informers were everywhere. The walls really did have ears.

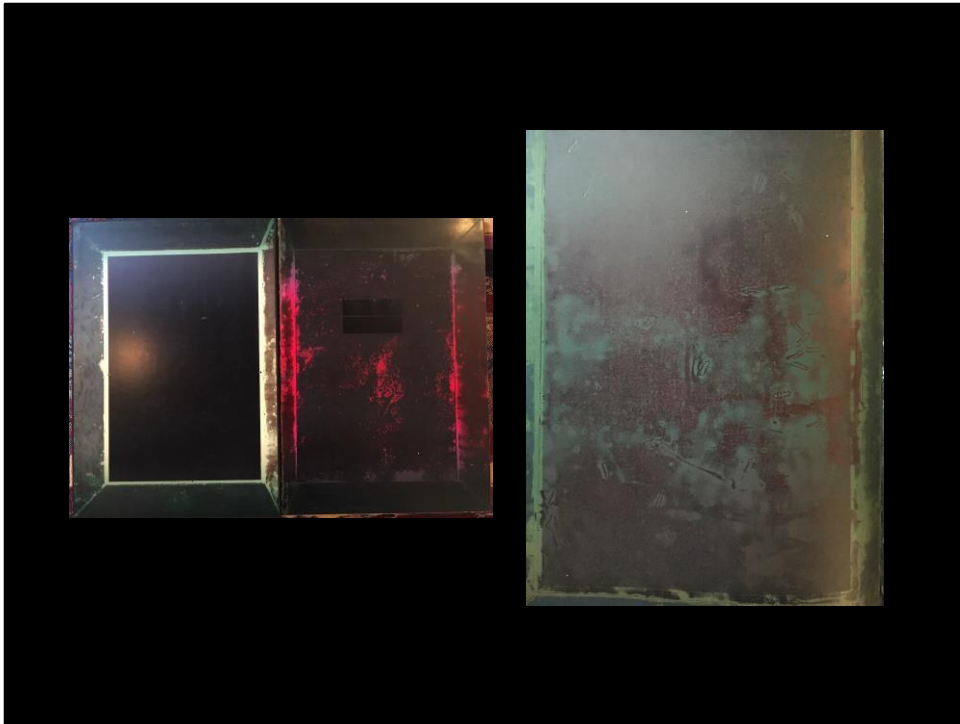


Rodchenko's response in brush and ink came close to creating a new art form,. Using thick black Indian ink Rodchenko set about defacing his own work. The macabre results, both brutal and terrifying, ...serve as the inspiration for the making of this book."

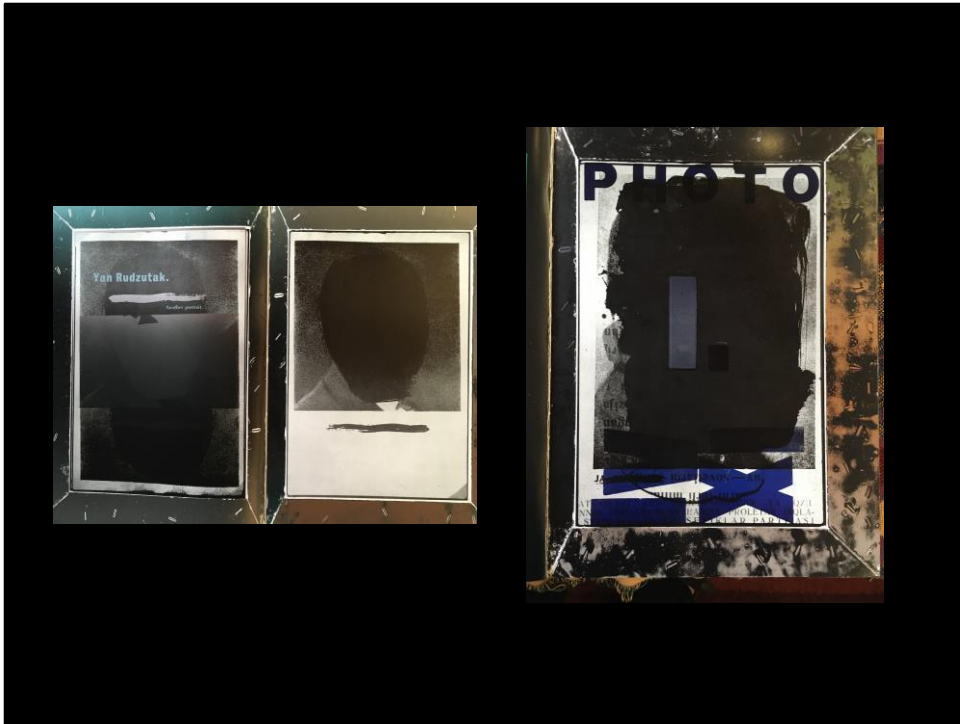
*The Commissar Vanishes: Falsification of Photographs
and Art in Stalin's Russia* by David King



David King is more than modest here: In fact it was through his careful research and as part of his much larger project & book, *The Commissar Vanishes: Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia*, where King recorded the doctoring of pictures under Stalin's reign, and personally recovered the identities of each obliterated figure.



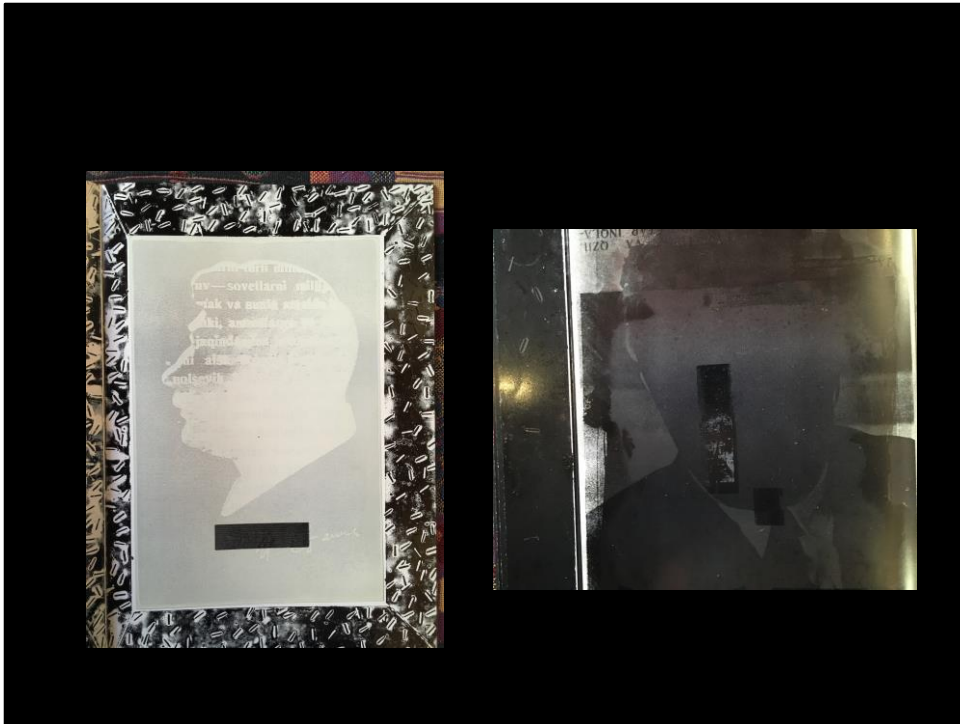
The artist book opens with dense layers of printed color – dark immutable tones– but otherwise seemingly blank. One notices the framing created around the edges, but little else other than the feeling that the printing of these inks is so layered and dense that one could easily peel it away. In turning the pages the touch and smell of ink dominate – one does not sense that there is paper beneath the imagery.



When text appears or images, they are difficult to read. Oftentimes they are under layers or obliterated by dark shapes – meant to be the black bars & stickers used by censors.

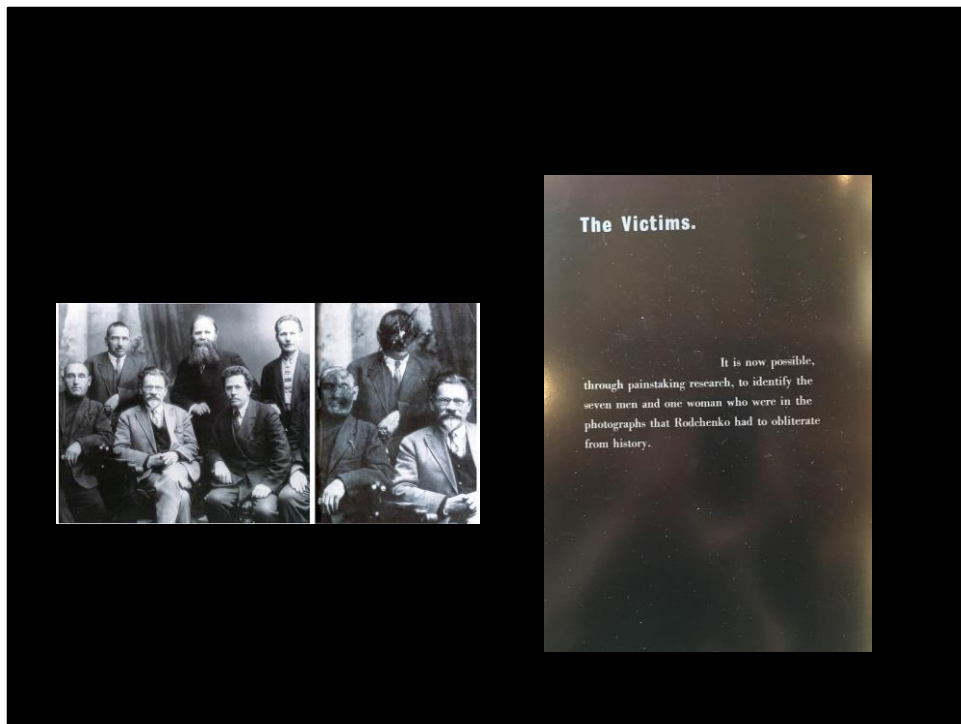


The choice of subject matter is powerful without question but the materials & tools chosen here are essential to its intensity & meaning. As is the repeated use of images and plates – sometimes turned upside down and printed over each other. Campbell prints and overprints each page: wiping out faces, adding biographical notes, adding entries like: "Exact Fate Unknown".



Ken Campbell states on his website: "Nine portraits, eight altered by Rodchenko and the ninth of Stalin as an endpaper to Rodchenko's book, were enlarged and layered over each other in a process of mutual silencing.

. I surrounded each of the marred faces with a printed frame that reflected both the page margins and, I hoped, the frame of a Russian ikon. This framing device is echoed in the preserving of photographs of the beloved and the dead."



And in conclusion he points out that: "This work stands as witness to the victims of censorship, and to the shame of self-censorship as a strategy of survival. "

An open book?



I have no doubt that as Nietzsche said, “Our writing materials contribute their part to our thinking.” Interestingly he wrote on a typewriter, rather than by hand. What that means to me is that Nietzsche understood that the choices of material & of tools directly impact the content & meaning of a work.

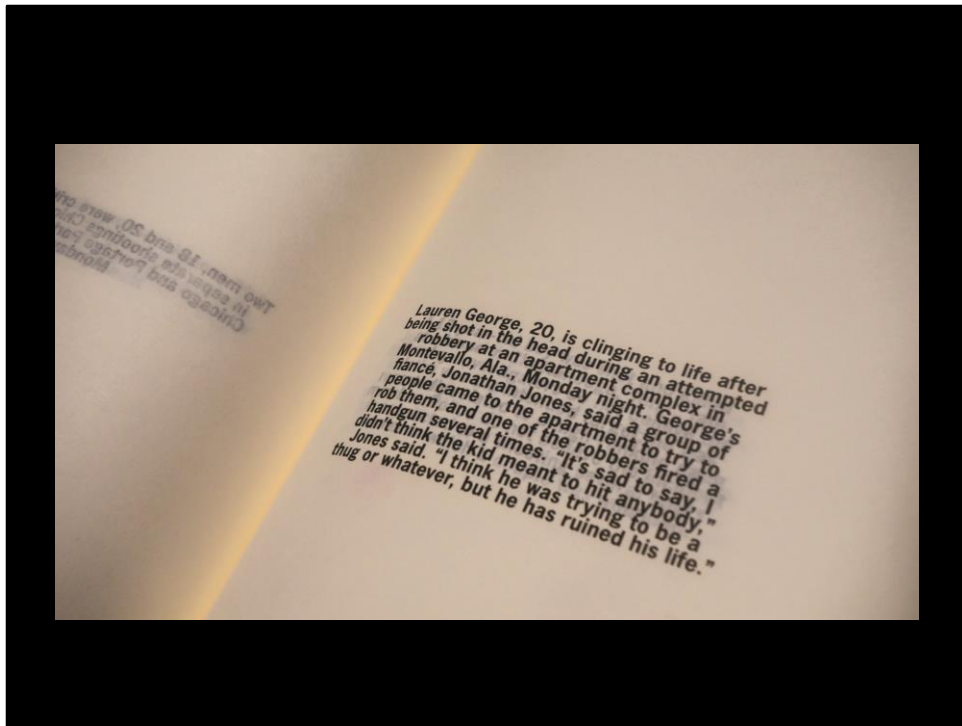
– Maryanne Wolf, *Proust & the Squid*. P. 24

Report US by Eileen Boxer, 2016

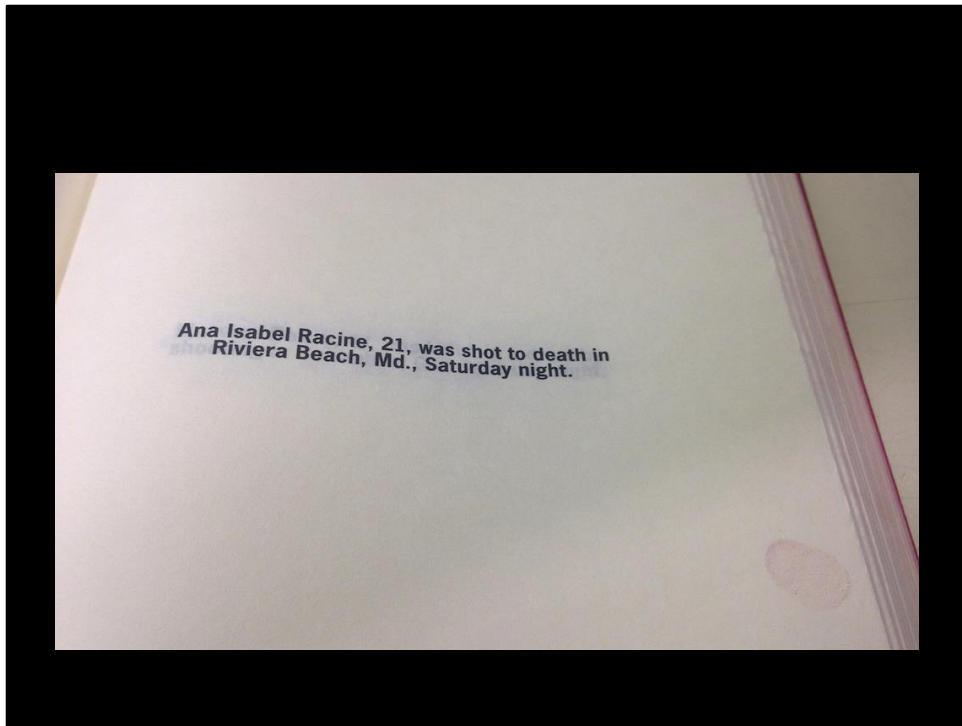


Eileen Boxer's *Report US* is a compilation of the incidences of gun violence within a single month in the US.

Some background: Since 1996 the U.S. Congress has refused to fund research into the effects of gun violence and there is no mandatory, national database relating gun incidents. Because of the lack of centralized information this project was compiled through various sources, primarily the Gun Violence Archive.



Struck by the daily onslaught of events involving a gun, Boxer launched this activist art project in early 2013. Retrieving the massive raw data on gun violence accounts occurring daily in the US and editing the material into concise narratives took hundreds of (emotional) hours.



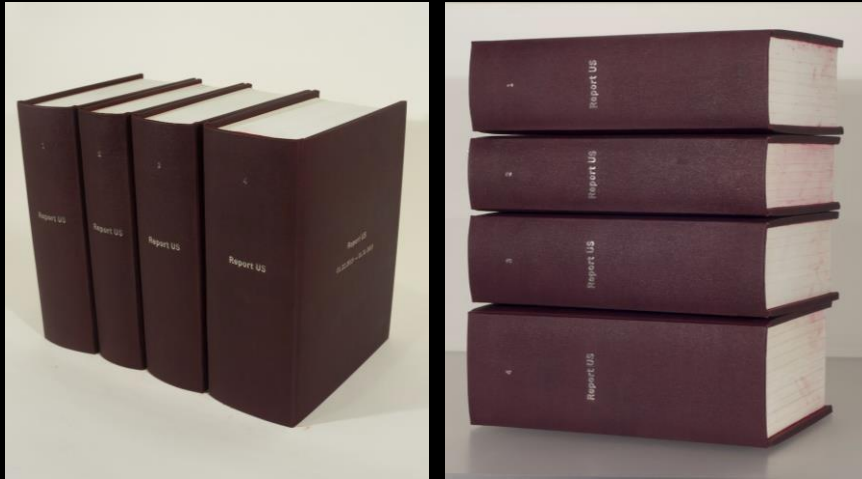
And it resulted in her uncovering what might be only a portion of what is really going on:

In the month of January 2015 alone: there were 3,136 gun incidents.



Ultimately, it was the need to make an object that could capture this horrific reality – that became the compulsion to make an artist book. And this was no easy feat: Boxer is an extraordinary book designer but for coffee table type art books (the Guggenheim Museum is a frequent client). The decision to make an artist book delivered her into uncharted waters – (full disclosure: I acted as a consultant for this project).

Report US by Eileen Boxer, 2016



After 2 years of research, Boxer made a set of **massive** books, each hand bound in blood-soaked cloth (cow's blood). Each volume represents one week and chronicles the more than 1000 weekly incidents of violence involving a firearm, one incident per page. The heavy weight of the volumes (which are even further contrasted by the lightweight papers within) -- manifests their overwhelming content.



One aspect of the haptic experience dominates this book (& again, full disclosure: I contributed the handmade paper here): The endpapers are further coated in unfixed red pigment, the color of blood. When paging through the volumes, the reader leaves red fingerprints on the pages. Metaphorically: there is blood on all our hands. **Literally the physical experience of reading marks the book.** And the red fingerprints that now mark its pages make the reader both a collaborator in the act of making of Report USA as it suggests we all are complicit in the terrible violence.

This book fulfills my compulsion as the
'maker' along with that of the 'reader' –
to use our hands.

This book fulfills my compulsion as the 'maker' along with that of the 'reader' -- to use our hands.

As Richard Minsky aptly put it: "books are active objects that DO things, and not always what you expect."

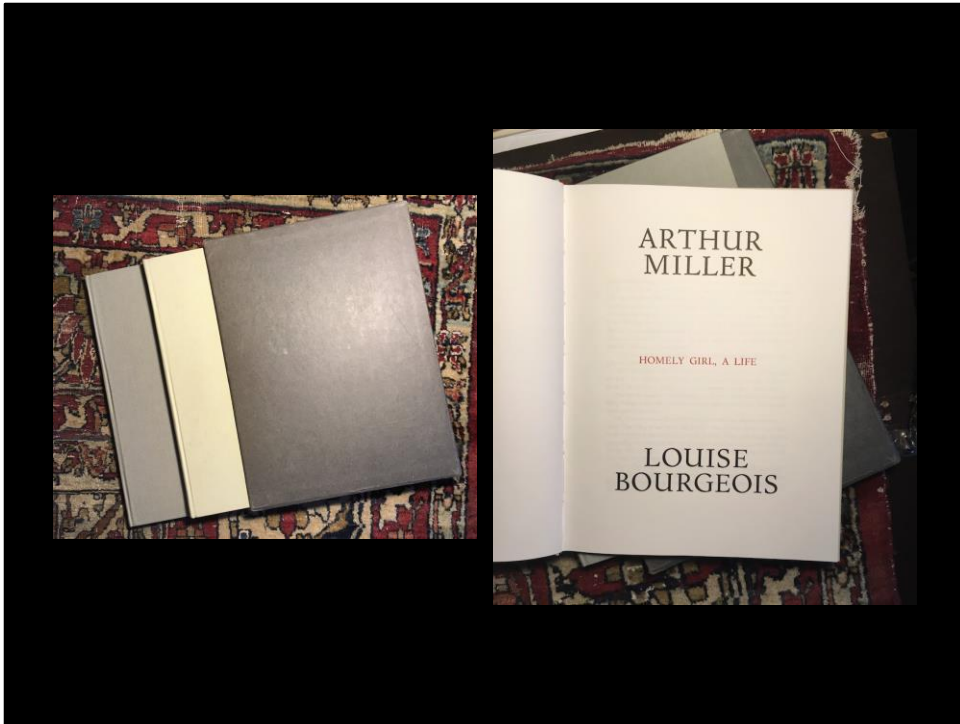
This 'multi-dimensional potential to effect meaning" is another compulsion for making artist books.

Johanna Drucker wrote in an article called "Beyond Velveeta" that "books are physical objects and our tactile experience of and with them is part of their multi-dimensional potential to effect meaning. -- in The Bonefolder p. 10

Homely Girl A Life, 1992



I turn now to an old favorite, *Homely Girl A life* By Louise Bourgeois & Arthur Miller. Peter Blum is the publisher of this interesting livre artiste: he had acquired an unpublished novella from Arthur Miller and arranged that Bourgeois would provide the imagery/illustration. She returned to him 2 versions, telling him to choose whichever he preferred and he brilliantly chose to include both of them!

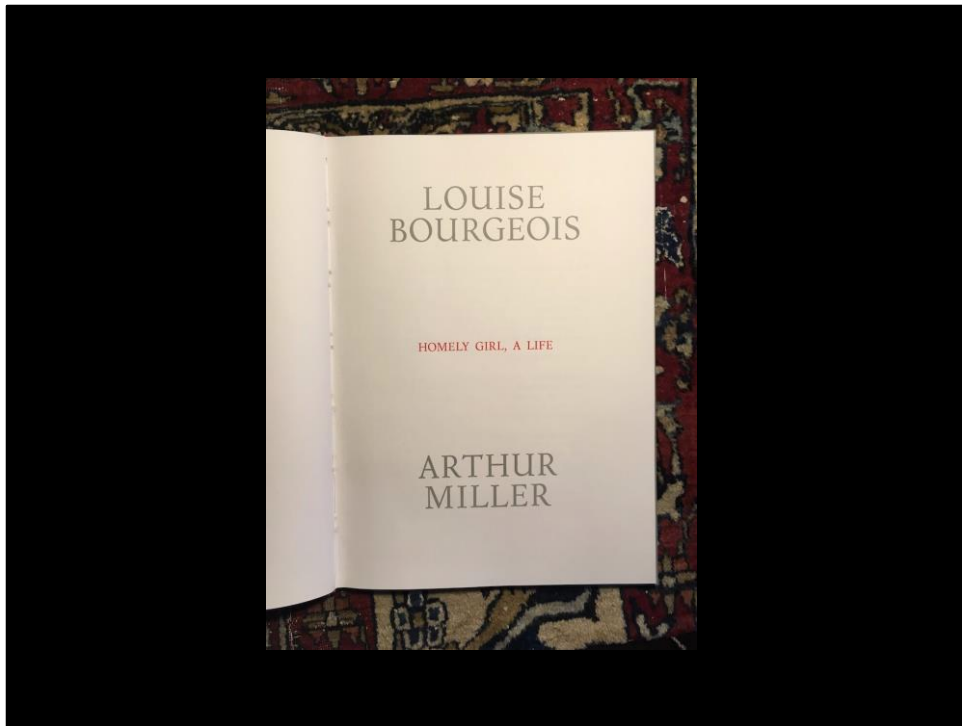


The slipcase is covered in a smooth middle grey toned paper. NO title or other information whatsoever is to be found. In the trade edition, the 2 volumes are covered in a soft book cloth – #2 in a light grey & #1 in a pale greenish grey. Upon opening #1, we see a slightly toothy lighter grey end-sheet paper – again no information. The smoother off-white paper of the title page presents Arthur Miller's name in large letterpress at the top of the page and Louise Bourgeois at the bottom (in Bodoni). The title is much smaller and printed in red ink: A HOMELY GIRL, A LIFE (homely is a dated word for ugly).



We open to page 1 and see a black letterpress printed text block on the white paper – which continues through out the volume, interspersed with 10 Bourgeois color reproductions of her etchings of flowers.

The novella is about a woman who has always felt ugly and that is an essential part her self-image. She has a relationship with a blind musician and this is the story of how she explores and finds another language to describe herself. Without doubt it is a well-written novella; Otherwise, it presents as a traditional fine press book. Nice. But that would not be relevant for this talk. THEN there is the 2nd volume:



We open this light grey cloth book, noticing its plainness & again, the non-descript grey endsheet, thinking now that perhaps all these neutral greys, slightly varying textured papers, and general sense of anonymity is purposeful – after all the story is about a woman whose looks & self image have been brought to question – So it makes sense that the exterior of the slipcase and the books within would be visually plain & haptically varied.

A change appears on its title page: the artist's & writer's names are still printed in large Bodoni but now they are reversed: Louise is on top! -- And not in black but a lovely light grey ink, that makes the red ink of the title pop out. Suggesting her contribution might have greater import here:

P. 1 Vol. 1

Janice awoke feeling cold that Monday morning, which was odd—a wind seemed to blow on her as she surfaced from a deep sleep, already recalling it was June and yesterday had been warm in Central Park. And opening her eyes as usual toward him she saw how strangely blanched his face was, although what she called his sleeping smile was still there, and the usual suggestion of happiness at the curled corners of his mouth. But he seemed heavier on the mattress. She knew immediately, and with dread she raised her hand and touched his cheek—the end of the long story. Her first thought, like an appeal against a mistake: "But he is only sixty-eight!"

Fright but no tears, not outside. Just the thump on the back of her neck. Life had a fix.

"Ah!" she pitted aloud and bringing palms together, she touched fingers to her lips. "Ah!" She bent to him, her silky hair touching his face. But he wasn't there. "Ah, Charles!" A little anger soon dispersed by reason. And wonder.

The wonder remained—that after all, her life had amounted to a little something, had given her this man, this man who had never seen her. He was awake now, lying there.

Oh, if one more time she could have spoken with him, asked or told him . . . what? The thing in her heart, the wonder. That he had loved her and had never seen her in the fourteen years of their life. There was always, despite everything, something in her trying to move itself into his line of vision, as though with one split-second glimpse of her his fluttering eyes would wake from their eternal sleep.

"Now what do I do? Oh, Charles dear, what do I do with the rest of it?" Something was not finished. "But I suppose," she said to herself, "nothing ever is except in movies when the lights come on, leaving you squinting on the sidewalk."

1

P2 Vol. 2

Janice awoke feeling cold that Monday morning, which was odd—a wind seemed to blow on her as she surfaced from a deep sleep, already recalling it was June and yesterday had been warm in Central Park. And opening her eyes as usual toward him she saw how strangely blanched his face was, although what she called his sleeping smile was still there, and the usual suggestion of happiness at the curled corners of his mouth. But he seemed heavier on the mattress. She knew immediately, and with dread she raised her hand and touched his cheek—the end of the long story. Her first thought, like an appeal against a mistake: "But he is only sixty-eight!"

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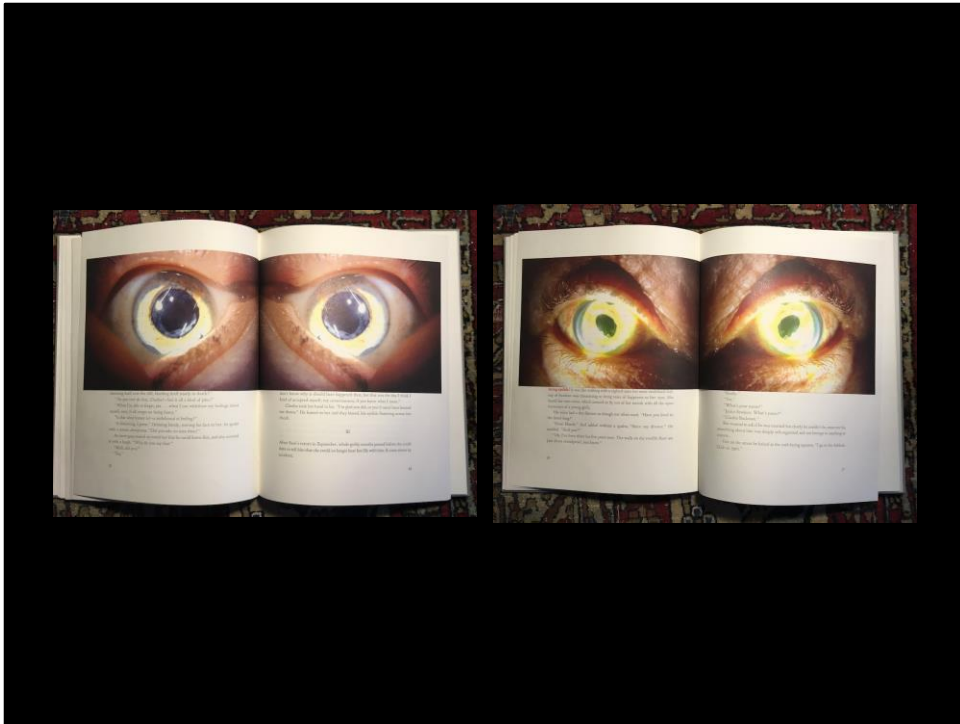
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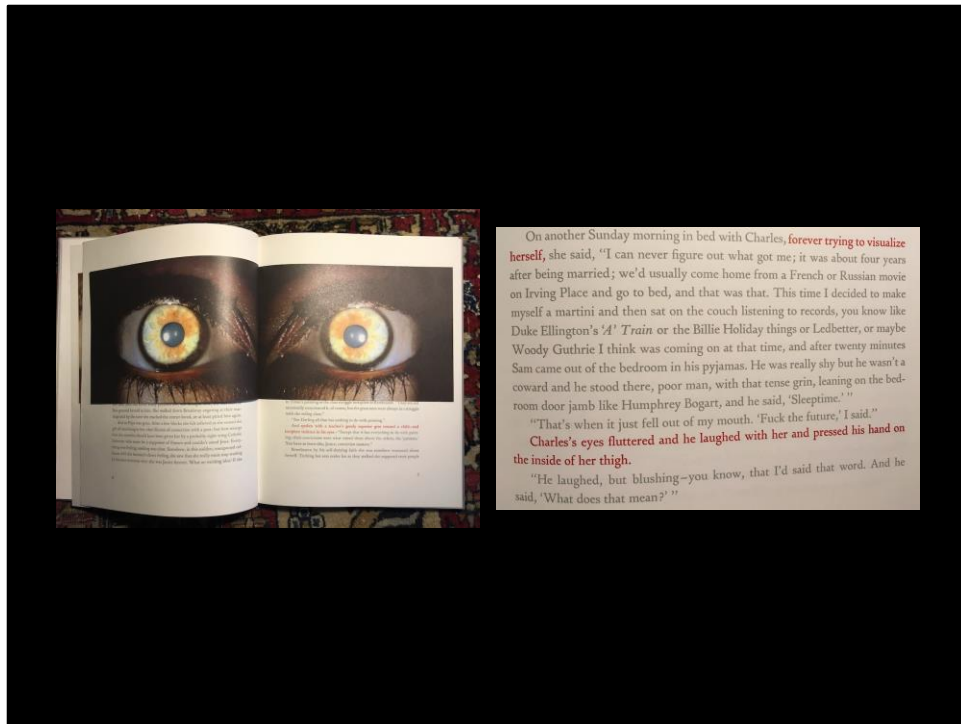
"Now what do I do? Oh, Charles dear, what do I do with the rest of it?" Something was not finished. "But I suppose," she said to herself, "nothing ever is except in movies when the lights come on, leaving you squinting on the sidewalk."

1

We turn to the 1st page to find that the text block is also a mix of grey & red lines. That is surprising enough but what is even more so -- the same novella has been published together twice!
What is going on? And why????



When we turn the pages, instead of 10 images of flowers, we see photos of diseased eyes. Blum explained to me that Bourgeois took just the right eye from medical magazines, and had him print it again in reverse, and then tip them into the binding -- the 2 eyes so close together that they are avian in appearance / and the book appears to be the face. The eyes get more and more difficult to look at as we progress through the same book – a far more Gothic interpretation of this story.



The grey/red text is also intriguing. After several pages it is clear that the sentences with words referencing sight, seeing, glimpsing, looking, etc – these are all in red. And since the reader is already familiar with the text, other sequences / other choreographies of the read -- are plausible: shall we read just the red portion? Or read only the red that is not covered by those 8 pairs of staring eyes?

“It is rare to find a livre d'artiste which interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities...”

Johanna Drucker points out in her 1st chapter of *The Century of Artists' Books*: “...it is rare to find a **livre d'artiste** which interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities...” P. 2
But by offering the text twice, and in 2 different visual and stylistic interpretations, Blum has orchestrated just that – a livre d'artiste that interrogates itself, utilizes all its parts to explore a deeper meaning that is posed by this wonderful novella!

Isn't that the idea of artists' books?

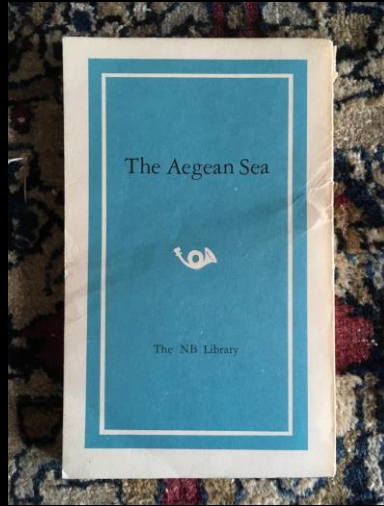


Isn't that the idea of artists' books?

"Books that understand their own operation, their iconicity, their materials and their content as an interwoven whole..." (How about some adventurous Reading?)

That was said by Kathleen Walkup, & I couldn't agree with her more!

The Aegean Sea

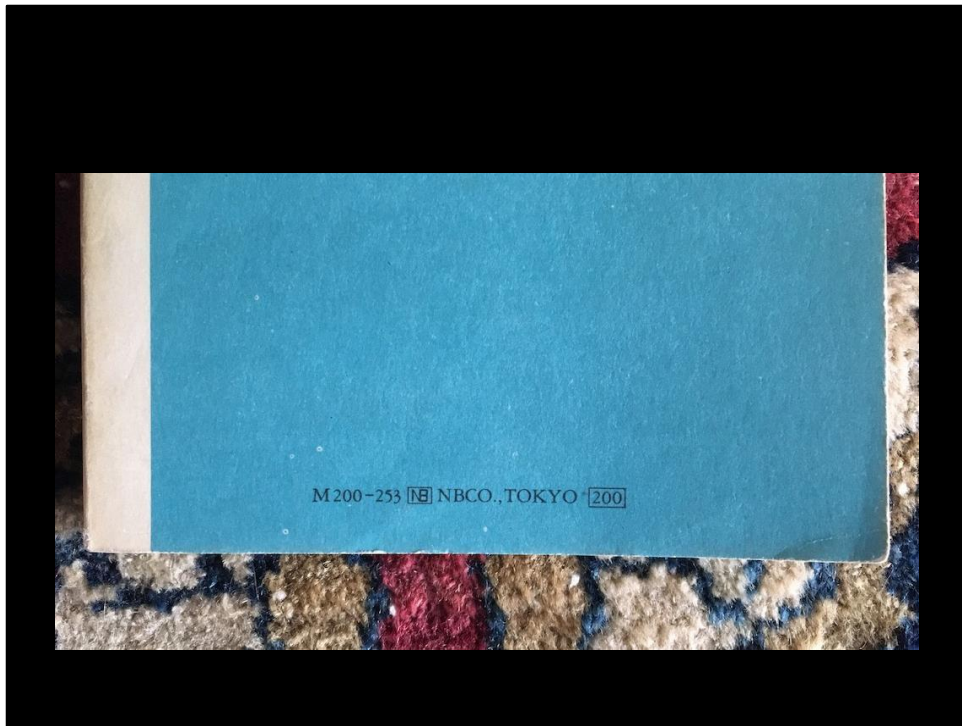


In conclusion: I'd like to present my 10th choice of books to discuss: The Aegean Sea. This small soft cover book was given to me as a gift by 1st generation Fluxus artist Geoff Hendricks. I've always loved this book for its unassuming manner and suggestive meaning and often showed it to students in my "Art of the Book" program at Pratt Institute, when we discuss the "Performance of the Read".

It is a small unassuming book: it looks like a Penguin series – with a familiar layout on the cover. But it is printed in a truly lovely turquoise blue – that color stands out and instead of a small penguin icon in the middle there is a horn – possibly a hunting horn but with the title, it feels more like an Ancient Greek instrument – title is the Aegean Sea after all.



When I opened the book the first time and paged through I was surprised to find nothing within. But then I thought about it and noticed that I was feeling the breeze as I flipped the empty pages (while thinking about the lovely blue and the Aegean Sea and imagining the place). What a wonderful Fluxus book – **where the simple act of paging through created the content.**



One detail I never quite understood is that the front cover (the one I just described) was on the right – so that the book went from right to left. When I examined it further, the left or back cover had printed on the bottom: M200 - 253" – 255 Tokyo 200.

So I never was sure but I imagined perhaps this Fluxus artist book was by a Japanese artist.

You see, I never knew the artist/author; And I showed it to students and never really thought about it. But, last month I wrote Geoff and asked him for the artist's name. He assumed it was Ian Hamilton Findley. Because of the right to left read and the Tokyo attribution, I figured I should check that out: I turned to Findley's website, but the book was not there.

未使用メモ帳『青春の詩』 木馬出版社NBCO,
TOKYO 新書判 150
円 未使用メモ帳『The
Aegean Sea』 The NB
Library NBCO, TOKYO 新書
判 150円 未使用メ
モ
帳『自由と愛』 西納文
庫 エヌビー社 文庫判
150円中!!!!
型番「M200-253
」~255。そういう文
具商品なのだろう、東急
ハンズの値札(200円
)も貼ってある。「



As we all know – and I learnt this from my daughter when she was 6 years old: ALL LIBRARIANS ARE GODDESSES! At this point, I wrote to a couple of them I know and trust: Stephen Bury at the Frick Museum Library in NYC and Paul van Capelleveen (Capa Leaf Fien) at the National Library in The Hague, Holland. Stephen assured me as did Paul that it was not a Findlay. But Paul went further: He wrote that:
NBCO or The NB Library in Tokyo is not listed in a world guide of libraries.
But he did find it on a website in Japanese, as you can see on the screen:

- Unused notepad "Youth's poetry" Koma horse publishing company NBCO, TOKYO New book size 150 yen
- Unused Notepad "The Aegean Sea" The NB Library NBCO, TOKYO New book size 150 yen
- Unused Notepad "Freedom and Love" Nishi Bunko NB Publisher Bunko 150 yen
- Sale! It is! It is! It is!
- Model number "M200 - 253" - 255. It will be such a stationery item, Tokyu Hands price tag (200 yen) is also pasted. "Aegean Sea" does not know the pronunciation, but in the dictionary "Aegean Sea".
- **Aegean Sea is a stationary item???**

The Google translation of the Japanese:

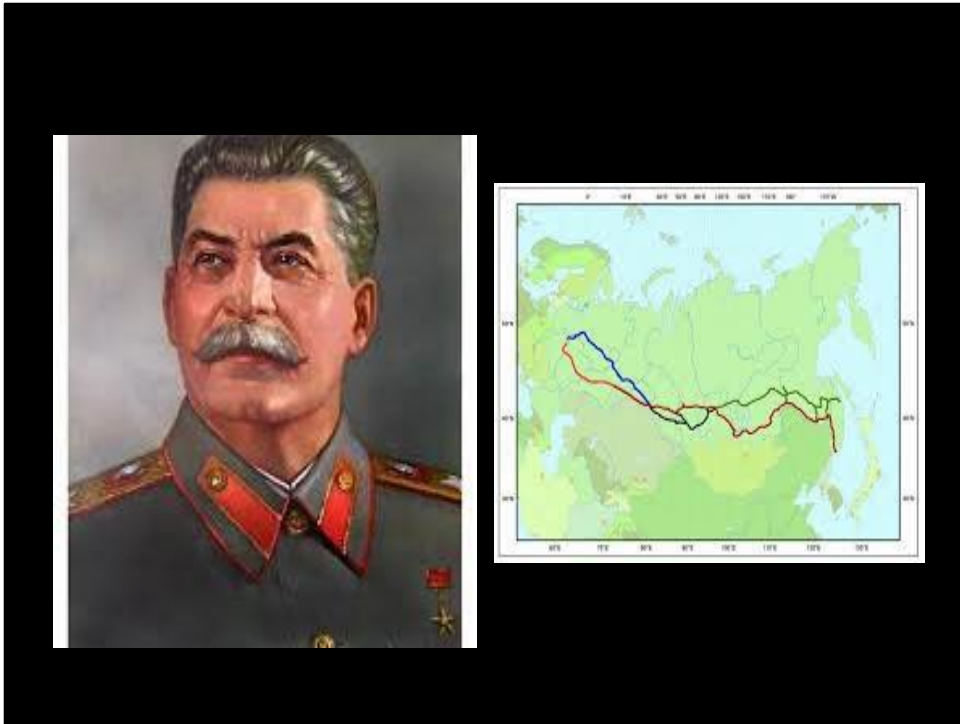
Unused Notepad "The Aegean Sea" The NB Library NBCO, TOKYO New book size 150 yen

Sale! It is! It is! It is!

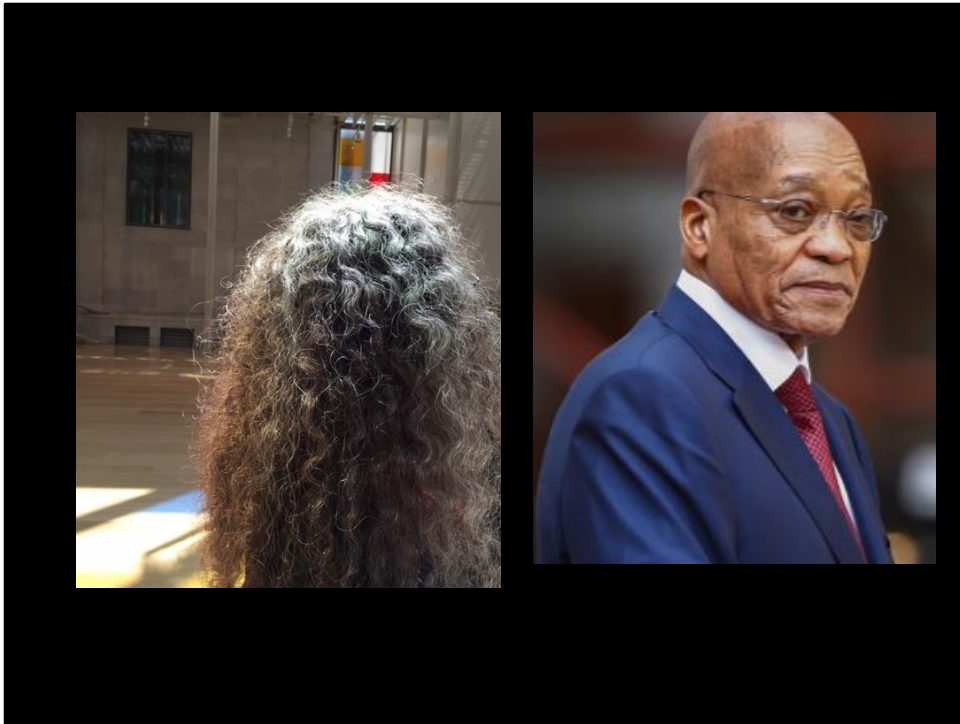
Model number "M200 - 253" - 255.

Aegean Sea is a stationary item???

Humbling but, Thank you Paul!



A side note that I cannot resist now mentioning is the urban legend about the Trans-Siberian Highway: An inexplicable semicircle is said to exist that breaks the straight line of one of its segments. The explanation was that when [Joseph Stalin](#) used a ruler to mark where the highway should pass, the pencil jumped over his finger. The engineers that were under threat to make the segment exactly as commanded, did not dare deviate from his indicated drawing.



If a deer or bok can be declared a document / and a road be built crooked because of a dictator's finger, then certainly: in this time of fake news & upside-down leadership, of Zuma & of Trump....

I have to laugh (or I might cry):

I invented the computer when I was only 8 years old / And now, I seem to have created a Fluxus artist book out of an empty note pad —
Perfect ending for a keynote speech don't you think?

A book is the one art object known to everyone.



Even though Walter Benjamin said in 1929, that: Everything indicates that the book in [its] traditional form is nearing its end.

I do agree with Gary Frost: A book is the one art object known to everyone.

Thank you.

