

art | southafrica

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A BALL OF LIGHT IN THE HAND

ARTISTS' BOOKS ARE SOMETHING OF A SUBTERRANEAN ART IN SOUTH AFRICA. IN THIS PRIMER, **ROBYN SASSEN** OFFERS AN INSIGHT INTO THIS MARGINALISED ART FORM

Ezra Pound once commented that a book should be a ball of light in one's hands. It was not with reference to the phenomenon of artists' books that he wrote this, but it is a poetic way of understanding the book as artist's medium. Not only would a ball of light be magnificent in one's hands; it would also be a difficult and rather dangerous thing to hold. In this article, I examine the contradictions that an artists' book embraces by way of its definition, medium, material and content, and also probe the dearth of a book arts discourse in South Africa.

David Paton, Head of the Department of Fine Arts at Witwatersrand Technikon, unequivocally bemoans the "othering" of artists' book as a serious fine art medium in South Africa. Paton, who is also an accomplished book artist, wrote an MA thesis through the University of the Witwatersrand in 2000, documenting the history of the artists' book and related book objects in South Africa, starting from 1960. Prior to this, in 1996, he collaborated with the bibliophile Jack Ginsberg in curating an unprecedented exhibition of artists' books at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). Cited as being second in scale only to a show held at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, this exhibition offered insight into Ginsberg's mammoth collection of internationally made books, as well as his South African examples.

The exhibition was orchestrated at a particularly fortuitous time, coinciding with the release of the Film and Publications Bill on Censorship. Although artworks of this nature would logically sidestep legalities in terms of censorship, they are not publications in the normal commercial sense: artists' books offer powerful and valid commentary on the discourse. Eight years down the line, however, not much else has happened to up the profile of book arts in South Africa.

Quite possibly this has to do with the intimacy and alchemy of the work itself. Making artists books is seldom about broad painterly – or videographic – gestures. As Pound implied, it is about creating something implicitly volatile, on a small scale. Or is it?

The first issue surrounding the artists' book is one of definition. Ostensibly able to embrace visual expression ranging

from printmaking to installation, multi-media to cottage craft, the artists' book is neither monograph nor illustration. It is also not literature. Broadly, an artists' book could be defined as any form of the book outside of commercial production, and includes books that foreground craftsmanship, fine presswork, original illustrations and hand-made elements. In his thesis, Paton offers a useful academic understanding of the term, one that is helpful in defining the range of subcategories to which the artists' book may be understood to belong.

Specific subsets include the Fine Press Book, a commissioned limited edition book in which excellence in typesetting and printing, choice of paper and original illustration plates are all important. Another well-established example is the *Livre d'artiste*, usually an extremely limited edition fine press book which rose to prominence towards the end of the nineteenth century in the west, and was usually commissioned by collectors and publishers. These books brought together the talents of writers, poets and visual artists.

Other examples worth distinguishing include the Book-shaped Object, which is usually a sculpture or other three-dimensional object which looks like, or in some way makes reference to, the form of the book. This category is distinguishable from the Book Object, which is a sculptural object that makes more direct references to the form and structure of the book than the Book-shaped Object or Altered Book. The latter category describes an existing book whose original form and content have been subverted by additions and alterations introduced by the artist.

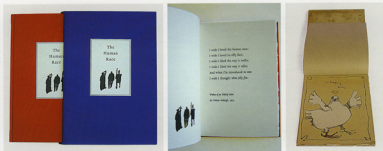
According to Paton, the artists' book itself is often something that sidesteps each of the typological definitions described above. It is not a sketchbook, nor is it a preliminary drawing for a final piece, but is rather something that holds its own in terms of an overall understanding, functionality, design and meaning.

Formalities aside, though, Ginsberg states that with the rise and popularity of Duchamp's gestures and statements about defining art in the early part of the twentieth century, "the definition of a book... can now mean any object which a



listing page

Karelle Geers, *Karelle Geers*, Hil Press, 1996, bound collectors edition. Although numbered as an edition of 30, only 10 copies were ever actually received from the printers. Information and images courtesy Warren Seabro, Modern and Contemporary Art **Issue** Karelle Geers, *The Withheld Form - RISAL*, 1996, multiple included in collectors edition of *Angst*, signed, stamped and torn booknote. Edition 2/10



left and centre

Robert Hodgson,
The Human Race
(The Artists' Press),
2002, artists' book
Edition of 130

right Flo Heringh,
Jaane of Aik (The
Artists' Press,
Johannesburg),
1994, plate litho-
graphy and gold leaf
on SFK Rives,
bound into brass
platecovers,
tanged and stab
bound with two
bolts. Edition of 40

book artist defines as a book". Ginsberg, who has been collecting artists' books for close to forty years, is also interested by the apparent alliance between the fine arts and literature that these art objects seem to represent. Paton contests this reading, suggesting that literature and its traditional vessel, the book, confuses the identity of the artists' book.

Be that as it may, the artists' book as a medium lending itself to sequential imaging, to a narrative that might not otherwise be possible in a two- or three-dimensional piece. An artists' book is usually self-contained as an artwork, and largely defines its own exhibiting space, not simply through technicality and structure, but also intimacy. Even a large-scale sculptural artists' book is conducive to being explored on a one-on-one basis.

Marking on its evolution, Ginsberg says the artists' book came to maturity during the rise of Conceptual Art in the west. Quoting David Blaney, Ginsberg says the medium became accepted as a "vehicle for artistic ideas". He does, however, acknowledge that it also has historical antecedents in the origins of bookmaking, "where illuminated manuscripts typify the ideal of any individual expertise". Perhaps, it could be seen to echo the church murals from the European Renaissance, where religious narratives were painted sequentially on church walls, for the illiterate church-going masses.

As such, the artists' book may be understood to straddle at least two sets of definition: a cutting edge and possibly subversive one, alongside a traditional one, deeply involved in the ritual and tradition of time-hewn practices and formalities.

From decisions regarding support, to binding techniques, the use of content and the manipulation of accessibility, the artists' book is art engineered with the potential for monomaniacal intensity. In his interrogation of different artists' books by South African artists, shown on the JAG show, Paton reveals the artists' book to be an artwork about disruption and humour, playfulness and deconstruction.

"The field of artists' books disrupts any certainty that the shift from authorship to viewer/readership is accepted and unequivocal." Paton adds: "...with their potential to per-textually dismantle the semiotic difference between images and texts, these objects often frustrate the postmodernist/post-structuralist reader's desire for ownership as much as they upset the modernist author's design for closure." Despite these conceptually itchy elements, grappled with by many local contemporary artists, the book as medium is still not offered credibility on this level.

As Keith Smith, a US conceptual artist and the maker of well over 100 one-of-a-kind books, comments in an instruction manual, published in 1992, "excellence in binding goes beyond



ARTISTS' BOOK ARE ARTWORKS ABOUT DISRUPTION AND HUMOUR, PLAYFULNESS AND DECONSTRUCTION

skill of the craft. It is integration of the binding with the other elements of the book: pages, text and/or pictures, the revelation and display." Any primer about teaching construction methodology to students would, of course, reveal this sensibility, but the book artist becomes a specialist in using and engineering structural concerns in order to embrace the concept behind the work snugly.

Considering the size and ambit of the collection of artists' books exhibited at the JAG in 1996, it is somewhat surprising that the discourse around this subject remains neglected, locally. Also, not many artists are openly specialising in this field, which still remains something of a poor relative of the fine arts themselves. Indeed, as local visual culture discourses are reinventing themselves with abandon – jewellery carving out a critical platform for itself in terms of value, credibility and academic acumen; Deborah Bell and Wilma Cruise creating massive clay sculptures that challenge and engage with its historical and cultural identity and use value – the mechanisms are technically in place for book artists to also claim their terrain.

Historically and anecdotally, though, artists have come to the medium because their works have dictated it, and invariably it is not taught as an elective at any of the tertiary institutions. (Wilwatersrand Technikon offers technical tuition in the medium for interested students.) This is not, however, a logical

deterrent. Paton laments the dearth of sponsorship and interest on the part of larger bodies that could make this happen, as well as the apparent fragmentation of book artists. There is no umbrella body able to give those individual artists and studios producing artists' books sanction and unity, to say nothing of credibility. Again, this is also not a logical deterrent. The history of South African art is proof that passion and apathy do not sit well together, and despite adversity, local book artists are comparable with the best in terms of technique, content, style and meaning.

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- Smith, K. *Non Adhesive Binding: Books without paste or glue* (The Sigma Foundation: New York, 1991)
- Blaney, G. *Work and fun: Artists' bookworks from the United Kingdom 1962-1982* (Open Editions: London, 1982)

left Nadine Gordimer with Dorah Ngomane, Alan Mposoku and Alasia Mkhonini, *The Ultimate Safari* (The Artists' Press), 2001, artists' book. Edition of 100

right Coevus Ogem, *Gaupua* (The Artists' Press/ Kuru Art Project), 1994, artists' book. Edition of 100 with 20 proofs.

Photos: Mark Atwood

/ SCORCHED EARTH

KIM BERMAN HAS PRODUCED NUMEROUS EVOCATIVE ARTISTS' BOOKS, REPORTS ROBYN SASSEN

Master printmaker Kim Berman has produced numerous works that contribute powerfully to the wider book arts repertoire. Berman, who heads printmaking at W Worcesterstand Technikon, learnt much of the technology in Boston, where she completed her post-graduate training. In the early 1990s, she created several series of images based on the foundation of the South African landscape in its political history.

"It was linked to all the field trips that I was doing," she explains, "because I was working for a development organisation at the time, and visiting all these rural projects and travelling a lot. Just seeing this landscape, hearing the stories and understanding the sequence through the landscape, made me realise that it couldn't be represented in one drawing. It had to be in a book."

These early bookworks comprised colour etchings on hinged-together sheets. This strategy, of concealing binding, further suggested the viability of the panorama. The concealing binding plays interestingly with landscape values because it stands up as a screen, and is interactive. It can be opened and read as a book, or opened out and displayed as a long work. While offering the intimacy of a book, it also possesses the visual impact of a two-dimensional artwork.

"I first opted to start using book arts in my work during the 1980s," elaborates Berman. "I was in America. [At the time] books in South Africa were being banned, censored. Books were seen as subversive. My books contravened [the then] State of Emergency regulations by depicting images of resistance."

Referring to her process, Berman adds: "All my images are sequential. I never see them as stand alone, so if they're not bound in a book, they're conceived as a series, as a narrative." Printmaking as a specialist medium logically links to the artists' book. "It's a natural kind of solution," Berman comments. "That relationship that one has with a book is about intimacy and engagement, but it's also about not seeing art as a precious object out there that's separate and alienated."

Artists' books are nonetheless difficult to exhibit. If presented behind glass, the viewer often has a restricted view. Conversely, when exposed to an audience's handling, they can be damaged. Even so, Berman feels that direct contact between viewer and artwork is important. "It's a demystification of the art object."

/ MODERN AMUSEMENT

JOHANNESBURG-BASED ARTIST MICHAEL MACGARRY DISCUSSES HIS NEW BOOK PROJECT



My work investigates the ongoing ramifications of western imperialism within the African continent. Of particular concern are the mechanics of control and vested interest that define the journey of cultural languages and products from the so-called centre to the periphery (and vice-versa), via established global trade routes. Central to my practice is a conceptually motivated exclusion of material artworks. The focus of production has been on a publication that presents 12 concepts generated over five years: a catalogue to an exhibition which does not exist, nor is likely to.

Self designed and written, *Modern Amusement* intends to function along similar lines to an album produced by a recording artist. It is a packaged resource and entertainment product for personal consumption. Attempting a perfect crime of formal seduction, conceptual resolve and readability motivates this means of working. This is based, in part, on the precedent of the *Nouvelle Vague*, a group of French filmmakers who in the 1950s wrote extensively before they were able to make films. They stated that such writing was a form of filmmaking.

The peripheral experience of global contemporary art is a mediated one, either via publications or online resources. The production of my own absurd publication mimics and ridicules this institutional mediation in the abstract hope that, to quote J-K Huygmans, "the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience."

left Kim Berman, *The Road to Mafik, 1996*, artists' book, edition of 4

top right Michael MacGarry, *Modern Amusement* (Michael MacGarry Press Media), 2004, artists' book, edition of 45

bottom right Book launch of *Modern Amusement* at the Phoenix Gallery, Johannesburg, June 2004. Photo: Michael MacGarry



/ ARTISTS' LIBRARY

ART SOUTH AFRICA ASKED THREE PROMINENT FIGURES TO LIST THEIR SEMINAL SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS' BOOKS

MARK ATTWOOD | THE ARTISTS' PRESS

Robert Hodgins, *The Human Race* (2002)
William Kestridge, *Curs Practica De Geometica Catalana* (1966)
Judith Mason, *A Dante Bestiary* (1990)
Cees'ae Qgam, *Gauguin* (1994)
Various artists, *GF 1* (1991) and *GF 2* (1994)

DAVID PATON | TECHNIKON WITWATERSRAND

Belinda Bignaut, *Antobody* (1990)
Willem Boshoff, *Bangboek* (1976)
Phil du Plessis, *Wurm* 12 (February, 1970)
Philippa Hobbs, *1764/18 Possible Synaptic Mirages* (1981)
Malcolm Payne, *A Chill Down My Spine* (1962)
Pippa Skotnes, *Heaven's Things* (1992)
Giulio Tambellini, *Seps: The Most You Can Give* (1992 - 94)
Various artists, *GF 1* (1991)

JACK GINSBERG | PRIVATE COLLECTOR

Kim Berman, *Emandulo Re-Creation* (1997)
Belinda Bignaut, *Antobody* (1990)
Willem Boshoff, *3/7 Day Project* (1982-1983)
Paul Emmanuel, *Cathexis* (2003)
M. Stephan Erasmus, *Book of Free Floating Inner Body Stuff* (1998)
Rip Hattingh, *Joanne of Ark* (1994)
David Paton, *As: A Negotiated Truth* (1999)
Malcolm Payne, *Face Value: Old Heads in Modern Masks* (1993)
Lyndi Sales, *Cunctivity* (2001)
Sonja Stratella, *In Honour of the Feather* (1990)
Giulio Tambellini, *Mhln Nemsln* (1968)
Elisabeth Vels, *Last Supper Codex* (1995/96)
Various artists, *GF 1* (1991)

* All lists are alphabetically arranged



left Various artists, *GF 2* (The Artists' Press/ FIG, 1994), collaborative book containing original graphics and multiples by 18 South African artists, 28 x 26cm. Slipcase by Michael Zeffert. **Cost** Hooves by Guy du Tost. Edition of 131. **right** Lisa Brice, *Woman in Thailand*, 1992, artists' proof. From *GF 2* (The Artists' Press/ FIG, 1994).