

Critical Convening Session

Terminology and Contextualizing Historic Material

2/26 @ 5pm EST

Instigators:

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This convening of international thinkers in 2021 will take stock of the current state of criticism for book art, identify what is currently preventing the growth of critical discourse around this medium, create sharable resources to support arts writers now, and develop ways to close the gap between book art criticism and that of other mediums. For this session, we're focusing on terminology and contextualizing historic material:

1. How does inadequate, inconsistent, or unclear terminology limit our ability to write critically about artist's books?
2. How can and should we re/contextualize historical artist's books?

After a brief introduction, we invite you to join the founders of BAR and a group of international guests in this convening as we split into small breakout groups to explore these questions and work on developing recommendations.

Each breakout group will discuss the same items before returning to the large group to share and combine responses. Please record your breakout room discussions here collectively:

How does inadequate, inconsistent, or unclear terminology limit our ability to write critically about artist's books?

- (type your notes here)
- Mainstream art critics can be hesitant to grapple with artists' books because of the specialized terms
- There are benefits to the mealability in other contexts (libraries; pedagogy), but can limit criticism
- Do we need a move from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity? Synthesizing a new vocabulary for art history or other disciplines.
- Lack of clarity can also be a barrier to new/student practitioners and critics
- We tend to talk about artist books as multidimensional, handmade, editioned, one of a kind, "bookworks", hybrids, durational, "books as art", "artist publication projects"
- What connotations arise with the term "artists' books" (with the apostrophe/singular/plural in various places)? Some people don't want to be called artists so this can create tension. "Book art" may connote a bigger umbrella.
- The connotation of the handmade in some terms can leave out offset or commercial processes.
- What about difference between "book art" and "book arts"? Does this distinction exist? The group is mixed on this. Some of us have not thought about it!

- “Art book” seems to suggest a coffee table book, a book *about* art, not “defiant” the way an artist’s book might be; might be a “friendly” public-facing term
- Terms like “independent publishing” can be more accessible than “artist publishing” or even “zines”; or “small press”
- Criticism gives rise to a “constellation” in which the piece being discussed has a relational context to other things - scope of history, theory, other objects -- critical reading is iterative
- There is some pleasure/enjoyment in the uncertainty of using terms/specific works -- the idea that something can be called “something else” than we’ve used to describe it ourselves -- that interpretative experience as a reader of criticism has value and can open up new ways of thinking
- Do we feel the need for critics to define their terms? Do we need those definitions so we’re all on the same page and the review can be productive? There isn’t always time/space to do this, it depends who the audience is, but we may need to articulate why we use a certain term / what the legacy of that term is, then move forward once those bases are covered
- Phil Zimmerman chart/continuum :
<http://philipzimmermann.blogspot.com/2018/05/photobook-vs-photo-bookwork.html>
- It can be problematic to draw distinctions too definitively
- Book Arts refers to the different processes, crafts, like “industrial arts” Book Art is what is produced--the art.
- For example, the Center for Book Arts teaches all the book arts, and exhibits book art.
- <https://www.collegebookart.org/bookarttheory/3806687>
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- Dealer descriptions (rare book language vs. artist books), artist statement, cataloger descriptions, exhibition labels - do these need to be the same?
- Context dependent - blog post vs. catalog vs. academic audience
- Are there resources for non-specialist audiences? How to describe, how to illustrate/examples. Greater need for those entering the field or just coming to artist books to understand. Opening Artist Books website (tied to LCSH/genre labels around form): <https://oab.lib.utah.edu/> (NOTE from the site’s development team-- this is very much a WIP, but wanted to share. Ex: all copy and images are space holders, except for artists’ books terms. I’m very much interested in this conversation: marnie.torrey@utah.edu)
- Do we need terminology for both form/structure and content and the haptic experience
- How to capture what’s in the head of catalogers, librarians, curators
- Challenges for students/makers on how to talk about their work - could be similar to those new to the field but different focus
- How to translate and maintain for different languages and cultures
- Benefit of limiting/focusing to a core vocabulary - also helps with cross-cultural access. Open to contribution and linking. “Also called” Artist Book Thesaurus Wiki model ala DAAP as well; resources are key to manage moderation.
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- Johanna Drucker: Not as focused on name of artists’ book vs. book arts
- First using artists’ book, but found book arts to be more open
- Moving behind the terminology to focus on the writing about it
- Finishing thesis - need to define terminology - need to set a definition, which has been difficulties
- Depending on the context, when applying to things, need to justify the relevance
- Would prefer one definition, even if it’s to be reworked
- Categorization can be useful, but limiting, in thinking about how artists work are categorized
- Useful to have a token of terms that will help write and talk about it

- Artist's book gives the connotation of being handmade
 - Run artist book exhibitions internationally, and collect books from around the world
 - In each country, "artist book" varies - in Lithuania, there are 3 words for artist's book
 - Sometimes, folks call a book an artist book just to position themselves into that category
 - Germany, France - book is made by an artist
 - Artists' book created from Germany, under a name might be a specific style from a specific time period
 - Need definitions of the field, but not necessarily need to fixate on what fits into what category
 - Digital vs. materiality
 - Done with the term, but need to describe the field
 - Important what the object strives to communicate
 - Artist edition is different from catalog raisonné
 - Different languages: changes how something is contextualized
 - When searching for Artist's book on Google, coffee table books might appear
 - Trying to find yourself in the right place - sometimes the tight definition offers an opportunity to push against it
 - One of the features Johanna Drucker's is self-consciousness - the artist knows the function
 - Set of properties
 - More productive to provide some definitions, to bring the struggle to the field
 - Historical precedents, bringing it forward to highlight the pushback
 - Not the naming, but what the book does
 - Most useful questions are *what* the book raises in terms of the book itself and its ability to communicate in a different way
 - Everything that is created in the digital age can possibly be considered a commercial art book
 - Before, the artist book was handmade, signature, limited edition
 - Difficult to believe that digital artist book is an artist - no limit of printing, no signature
 - Structure + form
 - Many possibilities for creating book
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- Librarians lean on controlled vocabulary to describe and analyze artists' books, special collections,
 - Bibliographer descriptions in catalogs like PM necessary for accounting of artists' intent, or in Library cataloging.
 - The term "Artist's Book" emphasizes the identity of the person who made the book. Does this also imply that the maker has a conscious understanding of the field and its audience? The term "Book Art" describes that art is present and in the form of the book.
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- only a few artists' books from African backgrounds that have historically been called in to be appraised
 - We need to write in a language that can be understood by governments, organizations, and specialists alike in terms of describing art, which can be problematic.
 - There are also problems in terms of international communication.
 - It's important to lay the foundation for terminology between entities.
 - Contemporary artists of color are producing more art books now, particularly as art objects and other kinds of multiples which tow the line between fine art and popular culture. Who appraises that, and who assigns value to that?
 - The idea of the art book as it stands now, with creativity and variations, puts us in a different space than we have been in in the past.
 - Difference between book of art, art book, and artist's book.
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- How can and should we recontextualize historical books? How can we be responsive to the present?
 - How inadequate terminology limit our ability to write about artists books
 - Architecture and science shapes the book >>
 - shape of the book, what it is made of, physical presence
 - Interdisciplinary study

- To be a critic you have to know how the book was created
 - Tactility and visual elements are essential
 - Each of the terms have a specific legacy and historic connotation
 - Artist's books linked to conceptual art
 - Book art is more tactile
 - Founded with Corina Reynolds CBA has a connection to tactile techniques
 - So title of BARreview connected to that
 - Get all the categories of the different fields:
 - Before you play chess find out about all the pieces
 - Guild of Books conference in the 90s
 - We can use the language from other disciplines
 - Every work has intention and this intentionality defines how we critic
 - Using the correct terminology is important
 - Multi-disciplinary therefore different terminology
 - Cataloging and searching makes it difficult
 - Lineage of these term and what they connote
 - Pie chart comes out from circumlocution
 - A way of organizing things by the external forms
 - THE NEW ART OF MAKING BOOKS - Carrion
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- Philpot - godfather of the terms...
 - "The Book Arts" / The Book Art Gallery
 - The question of the apostrophe
 - books arts is not specific enough. Artist Books and the Sailors Suit.
 - Where to put the apostrophe: artists' books, artist's book
 - Does "book arts" do the trick?
 - You Can Do a Graphic Novel, Barbara Slates
 - Librarians Perspective: Libraries and Artists' books:
 - Metadata
 - If you can't find it you can't write about it, you can't describe it
 - Catalogue-ability
 - Descriptions
 - Acquiring librarians: buying and cataloguing, rationale
 - Do the librarian and the cataloguer "meeting of minds"
 - One-of-a-kind books : does it catalogued as "Spain," "erotica," "zine," etc
 - A broader term, a spectrum
 - Craft, artistry
 - Joanna Druckher:
 - Assignment: google "metadata"
 - Are they "rare" or non-precious or Both and neither

How can and should we re/contextualize historical artist's books?

- (type your notes here)
- For people coming from trade backgrounds (printing, etc.) how to stay involved without being excluded by academic/specialist language? How can those traditions be retained?
- It's critical for the haptic sense to be retained

- Facsimiles, executed as well as what we have for medieval manuscripts, etc.
- Artists who are working from/appropriating/recontextualizing historical book material can create a bit of distance between the original print culture/material and the contemporary reader/viewer
- Altered books / interventions in historical printed material/forms also recontextualize this material - this practice can be an important way for perspectives that are outside a dominant framework to participate in that framing of historical books/material
- The space in which a book is being interacted with is important -- ie if you're in a library vs in an exhibition space, the mindset/context affects how one engages with the work.
- Questions like this seem to work from the idea that there is an agreed upon history/legacy about what the "key" books works are in the field(s) -- but part of this task might be unpacking that canon itself.
- Another approach is contemporary artists wresting the form from that legacy and using reference points outside the book arts canon in order to be more flexible / "shake up" the automatic associations that we receive from institutions
- Inclusion /access is key here -- who has the power to make the choices about what objects/histories get placed into new contexts?
- This question can include what historical works are included as artist books (Blake, Durer,) How broad is the question and does this include how we talk about early examples as well as a very wide range of forms Quipu, rock art, etc.
- Book is a lens for looking at past periods critically. Identifying problematic sections. Applies to contemporary material, too. Other voices need a space
- What is feasible for different types of institutions and across regions
- Lots of very explicit material
- This topic is not at all specific to artist books, can look at the wider practices dealing with trigger warnings, violence, under-represented communities. Sense of over doing it vs. undergoing it. Experience in archival practice, especially.
- Need to avoid risk of making things too "Safe" Concept of an "ethics of care" - not excluding material but not surprising audiences. Some help can come from subject headings.
- Potential conflict between this and opening artist books to a wider audience and broadening access.

- Framing book to the maker's other work and how one informs the other
- We bring our present interpretation to the book - book does not have intrinsic meaning
- Johanna Drucker's book - ppl weren't calling these examples as artists' book, but here are some examples
- As a historian, Wanted more about about books - a need to reach back and pull something forward
- Something that wasn't seen or appreciated
- Part of looking back: recognition of books that have been excluded
- Reflecting on the history of the book - rich area there to explore
- Kara Walker + Glenn Ligon - incorporate books in their own work
- Leslie Dill - focus on Emily Dickinson - making sculptures of dresses of text
- Bodini - had a typographer who worked with him, and never credited - new font created Suzanna Litco - Mrs. Eaves
- Technology: Books being digitized
- Pandemic has given more opportunities to participate in conversations, exhibitions, etc.
- Things being online - being more accessible
- Interested in the process, rather than the object
- Pieces that are reworked produced in a book
- Emphasis on the process

- Artist book is something that is continually evolving:
- <https://designassembly.org.nz/2017/09/15/printed-matter-and-the-document-a-conversation-with-p-mule/> - artist found the term 'artist book' problematic
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- First of all, how do we define the present?
- Definitions will shift even if we make them, and they change according to who is using them.
- Book artists are thinking about their materials more so than other artists; they meet conservators halfway, in the material aspect of their medium.
- We cannot separate history from material.
- Defining the self also an act of definition.
- How do we grapple with uncomfortable and problematic material or imagery in historical books? How about books in the present?
- Searchable databases of book collections are up for redefining of their terms.
- Geographic loci less important for contemporary definition than process-based terminology.
- In appraisal, the terms 'primitive' and 'outsider' are frequently encountered problematic terms. This is offensive, and historic.
- We have to consider where the words we use have come from and why we are using them.
- The concept of art is its own difficult definition. Artists have gone without recognition over that dispute.
- avant-gardism and experimentation to evacuate the confines of the art market
- How do we make sense of the outpouring of contemporary content?
- Genrefication
- We must demand a palette of terminology.

Kayla Romberger's group:

- What do we mean by "historical"?
 - Control of the gallery
 - Books made by visual artists.
 - Joaquin ... 1911
 - Ulises Carrión
 - Voice. Who's the audience. Who's the producer.

Recontextualizing v. re-discovering.

- What's a "canon" for the artist's book?
- Does "artist's book" have an origin?
- Printing presses were in latin america long before north america.
- Enlarging what we think of as "artists' book"
 - A cave is an artist book.
 - History of the artist's book from caves to VHS..
 - Preserving your information is a book.
 - Is a book portable. Scrolls, walls.
 - Does it become a book when it enters the museum...
- The democratic multiple died in 1993
- **Book History.**
- **The terms can be steeped in colonialism**
- Why would we?
 - What's wrong with the context in which they were created, not white washing for today.
- We would: recontextualize for new readers. Accessibility.
- Defining "historical"
- Books in the 1980s: we contextualize them differently now v. then. Books from the 80s as a "canon" of artists' books.
- The venn diagram of artists' books.
 - There are as many views as there are voices. As there are artists, dealers, collectors.
 - There are so many meanings.
 - It clusters around certain techniques.

Funding for this program is provided in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Founded in 2008, CABC has been a long time programming partner of Printed Matter's Art Book Fairs. This year CABC will be presented as part of Printed Matter's Virtual Art Book Fair.

- The same names and examples of books continue to be thrown around
 - Re: Writing and thinking critically about artists' books;
- there is room for recontextualization bc it changes all the time:
- Defining what's in the wunderkammer of artists' bookery
- What about sculptural artists' books. Not the names that are thrown around today / at this conference.
- Cultural contexts / cache: the work is slick
- "Visual Literature" - puts you back, way back. Before the 1960s. That fits under "artists' books" can help us recontextualize what the field is. This allows us to enlarge it, through time.
 - Concrete poetry...
- Our system of icons from the past...flows into the future
- Is there an official religion of "Artists' Books"?
 - Are they developing a very specific point of view
- What is the CABC for example??: The newness of this acronym Contemporary Artists' Book Conference (recent)
- By controlling the words...we're controlling the "thereafter." Do we want that?
- What are the parallels?
 - New Music
 - Black holes

Megan Liberty's group!

- from the session earlier referring to Cuban photo-artist's books that may be created by Cuban photographer, but are not printed/distributed by Cuban artists // there seems to be socio-geological-political boundaries to this field that may pose limitations on what the potential for the field is
- how do we understand creation? ref. to books by William Blake where he was creator & printer, verses Matisse's "Jazz" publication that was not printed by Matisse. When is a "book by an artist" an "artists' book"?
- who created the work and how was it created? self-printed verses commissioned printing (with various levels of involvement of the artist in the process, in the steps of production, level of collaboration, etc)
- what is the context for artists' books, and can this context be applied to the past?
- what does the colophon say/imply? is the publisher claiming that this is an artist's book yet the artist is not credited in the publication...(in multiple roles?)
- one-of-a-kind artists' book, cannot be reproduced, is not even a "limited edition"... is this a separate category of artists' books?
- in regards to the art-museum library... are the artists' books collected by the library or a curatorial department? This is based on the department's acquisition budget rather than any boundaries of where the book belongs (within history, if it can be handled? Where it is sold/bought, if it is exhibited, its preservation/conservation, etc)... how does this define this conversation.
- multi-tasking, ability to take on multiple conversations (does this relate to interdisciplinary arts?)