

Andres Manniste

Project 4: Anything But A Book

Artist's Books or The Lack of a Better Name:

“As in anything, there are always exceptions to the rule. With artist's books, I would hesitate to establish rules, only tendencies. Essentially, artist's books are contemporary art. If they are art, then they must be made by artists. If they resemble books at times, then they might be defined as books, or publications, made by artists. But what if they are made by philosophers or writers? Like Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* (1760) or Jacques Derrida in *Glas* (1974) ? Stephen Bury, author of *Artists' Books: The Book as a Work of Art*, 1963-1995 argues that no matter how inspirational these works are, they cannot be artist's books because they were not made by artists.

I would say, however, that artist's books, indeed, may be made by anyone that is willing to try. That is one reason why "artist's books" is not necessarily the most apt terminology for the genre.

There are raging battles about this terminology, and many variants of the term itself. The silliest, but most prevalent disagreement, has to do with commas, or rather, possessive apostrophes, the ones up in the air. Many people would say it is Artist's Book in the singular and Artists' Books in the plural.

I have noticed "artist book", "artist books" and "artists books" often used. With the spoken word, the discrepancies disappear. Each version sounds the same out loud, and punctuation is not an issue. Punctuation is becoming even less of an issue regarding the written word due to electronic communication. Some people avoid the controversy altogether and call the art in question "book art" or "bookworks". That eliminates both the artist connection and the possessive argument.

But it doesn't end here. There are all sorts of terms, for example "livre d'artiste" or "livre de peintre". They are used in english to define very special, often luxurious books with poems or literary works accompanied by original illustrations commissioned of artists by fine press publishers, often in limited editions. With artist's books, however, it is generally one individual making all the choices, without the involvement of an editor or publisher. In this sense, they may be likened to independent films. The final product reflects the artistic vision of one person, without imposed constraints connected to marketing or even censorship.

Another way to explain artist's books is by elimination, that is, by stating what they are not:

They are not children's books

They are not sketch books.

They are not diaries.

They are not blank books.

They are not exhibition catalogs.

They are not reproductions of a body of an artist's work.

They are not art books (a common misnomer).

However, they may parody or play with any of the above, as well as all other standard categories such as novels, self-help books, non-fiction, cookbooks, operating manuals, manifestos, travel guides, essays, etc. Artist's books function in the same way as contemporary art: as an expression of someone's creativity, often with social commentary, but sometimes in a purely abstract way, in absence of words or recognizable imagery.

Then should artist's books be considered a separate category?

The category of artist's books still confronts issues which no longer concern more established forms of art. They remain obscure as well: there are many artists and art collectors who have never heard of them.

What distinguishes artist's books from other art forms?

They are usually intended to be portable. They often come with specially created cases or containers to help in the storage, protection and transportation of the work. The cases are generally an integral part of the work itself, the first step in the viewing process.

They are mixed-media. They combine many processes. So that once the suite of photographs or prints or pulp paintings or weavings has been completed, the work does not end there, as it might for a photographer or printmaker or fiber artist. For someone making an artist's book, it is just one step of the way. Printing the text, die-cutting, creating a binding and a case, or preparing an installation, will often follow. Ironically, the final confection, which may include a portfolio of prints, paintings or photographs, might sell for less than a single, unbound image of artwork.

They are usually supposed to be touched and interacted with, often with a specific predetermined sequence. All of their physical attributes are not visible at once. And in the process of manipulating them, their multi-layered approaches attempt to manipulate you, just as the sequence of a film or even an obstacle course.

A single work may have a number of different display possibilities. Artist's books often have elements that may be arranged according to the viewer's preference, hanging or flat. Or the work may be designed to transform into a sculpture. An artist might interact with the book during a performance, or the book may transform itself, perhaps through melting, and be dubbed a "performance book".

They are generally not intended to decorate the collector's home.

... artist's books and the unusual experiences they offer are as alive as ever, despite the difficulties of making them, selling them or physically handling and displaying them. Why? Because people can't help creating them and enjoying them."

by Angela Lorenz

Project due: May 6 and May 10

This project will consist of creating a "*Livre d'artiste*" where you are encouraged to question the entire concept.

Materials: *Your choice*

Size: *No bigger than a 30 x 30 x 30 cm cube (a large shoebox)*

Class 13: (April 22, April 26)

Proposals, technical needs, experiments

Class 14: (April 29, May 3)

Assembly

Class 15:

Presentation of your project

(Note: You may work on your thematic sketchbook concurrently with this project)