

**Alicja Slowikowska and Joanna Stokowska - Interview with Tom Sowden and Sarah Bodman
Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw, Poland 26/06/08**

A = Alicja Slowikowska

J = Joanna Stokowska

S = Sarah Bodman

T = Tom Sowden

Alicja Slowikowska has curated over 150 exhibitions of artists' books and illustration works in Poland and abroad since 1994. She works as an independent curator and artist from her office in the Biblioteka Narodowa (The National Library) in Warsaw. She is the creator of the Polish Book Arts website: <http://bookart.pl>



Joanna Stokowska is a graphic, tapestry and paper artist, and a member of the International Association of Hand Papermakers and Paper Artists (IAMPA). She was co-organiser of the 1st Polish Exhibition of Paper Art in 1994. One of her many awards was the Polish Artists Union Award for the book "Library of Thoughts" at the Contemporary Polish Book Art exhibition, Warsaw 1997. Her work is in museums and collections in Europe and the USA.

S – As part of this project we want to show people examples of different books from different countries, to see what the similarities or differences could be. We will be adding them to the project website, to say: "this is what goes on in Poland, this is how books are made and understood here" Radosław Nowakowski said that you were responsible for most of the current activity with artists' books exhibitions here, so this is why we wanted to meet you.

A – You want to know what is specific in the Polish art book? Unique books?

S – It's the unique book that seems to be most prolific here. Radosław was saying he doesn't feel that his books are artists' books, but we feel that they are, compared to the kind of books we make, and from the books we see in the UK, his books fit into that category. But here he is very different to everyone else; he isn't "artists' books". If you say "artist's book" in Poland, it appears to mean: unique book, sculptural book, book object, not an editioned book. If you have editions of books then you think they are more like "fine press" perhaps?

A – Yes. We have very good book designers, but usually we don't think a book published in an edition is an artist's book.

T – Do people ever make more than one book?

A – Sometimes an open edition of maybe four books.

S – In the UK, if someone says open edition, it could potentially be thousands, but it can also mean maybe ten.

A – It's like graphic art, you are allowed to make 100 copies. No more.

S – But some artists' books in the UK and USA are made in an edition of 1000. I would guess that most are made in an edition of less than 50.

A – Is this kind of book printed on special paper? Because ours are printed on special paper, chosen for special qualities, and it is very expensive.

S – That can be the same. Maybe those books would be £500 to £1000.

A – Are there many people interested who buy them?

S – Yes, but mostly bibliophile collectors who are not so much interested in the artist's book, more in fine books, they're buying more for the value of the appearance of the book and how it is made, not so much for the content.

A – what about the institutions?

S – Yes, they buy books. But they have different ideas. Tate Britain for example, for their collection will only buy artists' books which are from larger editions, and not too expensive. Not one-off books, expensive books, they want their collection to reflect contemporary art, but not books which are very expensive or too precious.

A – There are many people interested in buying books?

S – A lot of colleges, where Tom was working at Manchester Metropolitan University, they have a huge working collection, probably the best in the country.

A – And they would buy books for £500?

S – Probably that is a lot for any college, our books for example, would cost between 15 and 100.

T – Many people who collect books won't spend a lot of money, up to 70 but not above,

A – Most of the art books here are in the museums and the collection of the Tryzno [Book Art Museum Łódź www.book.art.pl].

T – Alicia you know so many people who are making books, can you tell us if people are using digital technology to make them now?

A – Ah, it depends. Each artist has their own working methods. Mostly it is hand made. Those who are young use computers; you have to know the software, and its secrets. You can notice how fast things are changing. Later handmade objects with lots of paintings, calligraphy and drawings were in majority. Now more and more digital technique is used or people combine old techniques with the new ones. People make really different books, for instance, books without text, but with a lot of meaning.

A – You don't always need words to say something.

T – Do you think there are many books like that – without text? Or do you get a mix, books with text as well?

A – If you make a book without text you can include images or coloured paper which have meaning. That is interesting, to make something really special, to have your own ideas and your own reflections.

T – Do you think it is changing, in Poland, the way people are making books?

S – The methods of producing book are changing.

T – Is the computer becoming used more?

A – It is difficult to say.

S – Have you noticed more books made with certain methods? Or a complete mixture?

A – Very often a complete mixture. We have artists only writing by hand, others for example prefer only typography. Others discover new materials and new techniques and use them with old techniques. There are some artists who think about their project and if they start to make something, they will know already what it will be at the end. But there are other artists who never know; for whom it is an adventure. And that is my point of view.

T – Do you find people making books are making other artworks, paintings perhaps, or is it just books?

A – Well, you Joanna, make graphic poems for example, poems in space. And books are just one of the branches for us. I try to find the best original way for my idea to be made.

T – So it could be a book, or something else.

A – It could be a book, or a textile for example.

J – But you are asking whether we are working with only one branch of art. I think no. Very often there are different branches, for example I have made architecture material in fine art.

S – And this is the same for many artists in Poland?

A – It was in the beginning, before WWII in Poland there was something we were very strong with – graphics, posters, and words in pictures, then, not now, and I was very interested in it and afterwards, what became interesting for me was tapestry, so that is very different, and then from tapestry it was a very short jump to paper. And so after that, I started with books.

S – Do you think that there are more people now in Poland who make books?

A – Just now yes. A few years ago there were not so many.

J – I think because of Alicja's exhibitions.

S – They see them and think I want to do that too.

J – Yes.

T – Because there are more people making books, are there more people collecting them too?

J – Yes, libraries.

A – Museums sometimes. But here in Poland, there are some private collections too.

J – It is very complicated. Interested people mostly buy books from auction houses.

A – Photography, comics and multiples, are growing, and I feel that book art is becoming more interesting. One of my future plans is to have a whole centre of book art, maybe with a shop, which has many types of books.

S – That would be one of our wishful plans too!

A – We have already had many exhibitions of books and illustration in Poland, with national and some international artists, and exhibitions showing the best of Polish book art, with prizes and invited book artists

T – When did you start to work on so many exhibitions?

A – Ah, it was 1994, a time of transformation in Poland, from the political point of view, but a transformation too for artists, and our books.

J – We became free.

S – After 94. But before that you'd been underground. Radosław was saying that artists would print no more than 100 copies of anything, because after that you had to get permission, and then it was censored. So that's why people always did editions up to 99. That cleared things up for us, because we assumed that people just liked making 99 copies. But actually there was a very serious reason for that.

J – During these difficult times we had a very serious underground movement, and many books were printed in a very simple way but some of them were very expressive, very precious.

S – Were these fiction, or fact? Or art, politics?

A – No, poems mostly, and many were political but not all. I think that it was all over the world, that in Poland after our independence, all the books began to be very angry. But now many books and posters are printed not from an artistic point of view, but from a commercial point of view and there are many copies of them with very simple and uninteresting pictures. So it is a pity. We were free but at the same time not free. All the works that were wonderful before, posters as well, Poland was very famous for a lot of posters and graphics, but they disappeared. Posters now, if you look at the street, are awful.

T/S – So many of them are - Radosław showed us all the advertising billboards on the roads, one after another, they seemed endless.

A – There is no metaphor, no imagination in them - they are made by machines. Sometimes they come back to aesthetics, but not very often.

A – I started a new gallery in 1994 because no one knew what is in books arts, only a few. I wanted to promote this art to all people not only to artists.

S – So everyone can see books.

A – And the people's choice of books must be open, democratic. I don't want to present or promote only one group, for example conceptual, because it is too specific. Like you, you present all ways, different ways of making.

T – All ways and all artists. Yes.

A – Artists without borders - I would like to show different styles, different generations, different ways to make a book. I have two parts in most book art exhibitions, why? - Because illustration is connected with the book, and also because artists who are interested in illustration have to be supported too; illustrators of children's books, catalogues, illustrations

by themselves. Later, step-by-step, I started to arrange exhibitions according to these individual themes.

S – So these were all curated by you, for the each gallery.

J – Yes, and without help.

A – Yes, any books or editions, very democratic, any artists. But when I travel with exhibitions it is different. I have to curate them, to decide what to include or it is too much.

J – Alicja, you have to say you have been travelling all over the world.

A – Yes, I have made more than 150 exhibitions in different countries and sometimes people visiting them were fascinated (for example in Israel at the Jerusalem Book Fair). I often do this alone, but have worked with others in Poland – mainly, Radosław and the Tryznos, we enjoy working together from time to time.

T – So you are the core group.

A – Yes. We all help with books and sometimes we travel together to help with shows, translation and so on. I had problems with my union, I joined with them because it was an organisation, and if I was affiliated with them I could make grant applications, which you cannot do as an individual.

J – But it didn't work very well, because the programme simply wasn't commercial enough. It was about art books and was not making money selling large artworks.

A – It couldn't work, it was impossible to follow this idea, so we separated. I had to work somewhere, so I met with the director of the library and she agreed that they could offer their support.

S – I think anyone would need that support, somewhere to make your applications from.

A – Yes, I am the secretary, manager, director, cleaner, artist, and make all the grant applications.

S – It's a lot of work.

A – Yes, it is but it is what I do.

J – I am thinking now about an expression I heard in English, about reading, about books... it says, we read to know we are not alone. That is what Alicja does, she makes sure book artists are not alone.

Many thanks to Alicja Slowikowska and Joanna Stokowska for agreeing to be interviewed for this project.

For more information on Polish artists' books see Alicja Slowikowska's website at: <http://bookart.pl>

For more information about Joanna Stokowska see:

<http://www.bookart.pl/en/autorzy/pol/stojoa/autor.html>

<http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/canon.htm>