

Traditional and emerging formats of artists' books: Where do we go from here?

Two-day conference at the School of Creative Arts – University of the west of England, Bristol, Uk.

PHOTO 1

BOOK ART. CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE 2nd HALF OF THE 20th CENTURY: THE 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's AND 90's BOOK ART

Thursday 9th July 2009

Bibiana Crespo, PhD

Artist and Lecturer at the Fine Arts Faculty – University of Barcelona

PHOTO 2

According to Johanna Drucker —one of the most important specialist about the topic— Artists' Books

are the quintessential 20th-century art form, one obviously fated to continue into next century

DRUCKER, Johanna, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Granary Books, New York, 1995, p. 362.

In the 2nd half of the 20th Century, the Book Art was one of the prominent ways of expression. The production of the post-war artistic movements was very often formalised in book form; the Book Art was then transformed into a highly personalised object. All contemporary artists have used the book to reveal their aesthetic ideologies adapting them to different formats, materials and existing techniques. The Book Art was one of the main creative focal points for all the vanguard movements and artistic positions around that time. The common consciousness and willingness to abolish and to break the prevailing norms of the art market and its economic speculation, the firm goal to destroy the aura aspect of the one-of-a-kind work of art, the tendency to an art multiple, economic, democratic and ephemeral, and finally the electronic art and the net art lead to a favourable field for the Books' Art as the most attractive alternative to achieve artists' projects and purposes.

PHOTO 3
INTERACTIVE

INDEX

In order to understand the concept and evolution of the contemporary Book Art and to establish the foremost parameters which will shape the canon for the Artists' Books in the 21st century it is necessary to analyse the changes and the development that the Book Art suffered during the 2nd half of the 20th century. The understanding of the evolution of this singular art form is the starting point of the artists' creation in our current century.

⇒ So, in this lecture we will explore the 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's Books' Art.

PHOTO 4

THE 50's BOOKS' ART

- CoBrA
- Concret Poetry/Visual Poetry
- Lettrism
- Situationists'
- *Nouveau Réalisme*
- *Dau al Set*

The Book's Art made in this decade used cheap reproduction means, particularly the combination of photographic techniques with photomechanic ones. After World War Two artists discovered offset advantages: fast reproduction and economization of materials.

PHOTO 5

CoBrA

CoBrA artists based in Holland, Demark and Belgium produced many publications as a way to disseminate their artistic ideas and *CoBrA* ideology —like anti-aestheticism, freedom in the art practice, the use of writing as the most direct expression of the human psyche, etc.— embodied publications as a central pivot, like: *CoBrA*, *Le Petit figaró* or *Tout Petit Cobras*.

CONCRETE POETRY/VISUAL POETRY

This international movement included artists from England, USA, France, Germany and Brazil, and was focused on involving the reader in a visual and intellectual game through words and the suggestive and evocative power that they provide depending where they are placed on the page.

It mainly was a poetry movement highly influenced by other movements and artists of the 2nd half of the 20th century as: Dieter Roth, Ian Hamilton, Hamish Fulton, Maurizio Nannuzi and John Cage.

⇒ Despite the fact that it does not have the same meaning, the VISUAL POETRY movement has been often linked to Concrete Poetry aesthetic, though in the Visual Poetry you use your senses to figure out what the words mean.

In Spain the Catalan artists Antoni Tàpies and Joan Brossa did many books under this premises, like *Novel·la*. In it the artist influences onto the texts which have been reduced to the forms that testify our lives —birth, baptism, insurance and death form.

Their works show a perfect synchronization between artist and author. It is said that the conjunction between Brossa's texts and Tàpies's graphic arises from contrast much more that from formal convergence.

From the 15 books that they did together we can underline:

Frégoli (1969)

Nocturn matinal (1970)

Poems from the Catalan (1973)

LETTRISM

The leader of this French movement was the Romanian artist Isidore Isou. One of his most relevant works is *Le Grand Désordre*. In it the artist practically inverted and cancelled any aspect of order. All the contents are in an envelope: cigarette butts, theater tickets, stamps, opening invitations and advertisements. He also experimented with the shape of the letters and their symbolic conventions as well as the replacement of signs with marks. The mess of this miscellany of objects challenges the viewer to decode and organize the supposed biography of the artist.

PHOTO 8

SITUATIONISTS'

The most important channel of expression of the Situationists group was the magazine *Internationale Situationiste* which counted 12 issues published between 1958 and 1969. The texts and images of those 12 magazines are, without any doubt, a thorough show of their aesthetic ideology and the best way to diffuse and to expand the philosophy of the group, a strong critique to all contemporary culture against the incipient capitalism arising in the post-war times, against the Stalinism of the European left hand and Social Realism. With this aim they used overlaid tipographies of different bodies and colours incounterpoint with images bringing a dialog of multiple meanings

Other publications of the Situationists' were: *Hanegal* (1961), *Stavrim Sonetter* (1061), *Daka Bygget* (1963) and *Franco Assasine* (1966) "R"—machine guns cacophony—.

PHOTO 9

NOUVEAU RÉALISME

As many other artistic movements of the 2nd half of the 20th Century the *Nouveau Réalisme* group aspired to make a revival of the Dada movement and to proclaim an objectual art, happenings and *assemblages* of materials. However, although most of their production were of this sort they also produced remarkable publications.

In their publications they used the "Ultra-lettre", defined as letters with a very high and powerful ultrasound unreaable by the eyes. Deformed tipographies making phonetic poems.

The first publication was *Hépérile éclaté*. The syllables have a fluent consistency becoming an uncomprehensible text, mobile and light.

PHOTO 10

DAU AL SET

On the other hand, in my country, after the Civil War and the settled Franco Dictatorship, Spain presented a distressing scene. The first signs of resurgence and recovering of the artistic avant-garde were in Barcelona with the appearance of the group *Dau al Set* and the publication of the homonym magazine *Dau al Set*. The first issue was in 1948 and lasted monthly until its dissolution in 1956.

Each number edited by two of the members of the group—a writer and a painter— working with independence and freedom. Technically it was reflected through the use of many different printing qualities, collage and diversity of papers.

It was greatly impressed by the *Almanaque* of *Der Blaue Reiter* and the German existentialist philosophy of Nietzsche and their interest about popular art, as well as nourished by the typography influences of the Dada magazines and the esoteric and magic subjects of the Surrealists.

PHOTO 11

THE 60's BOOKS' ART

- Fluxus
- Zaj
- Pop-Art: Ed Ruscha
- Dieter Roth

In order to contribute to the 60's postulate 'the dematerialization of the art object'—according to Lucy Lippard's book—and a non one-of-a-kind art work and its speculation, all kind of ephemeral and marginal means of publishing material were accepted in the 60's.

PHOTO 12
INTERACTIVE

FLUXUS

The so well-known Fluxus production can be divided into: publicity material, music scores or press scores for events, graphic ideas and objects. Publications are the marrow of the ideology of this artistic movement.

- ⇒ ⇒ Publications like *Preview Review* (1963), *VTRE* (1963), *Flux Paper Events* (1976), the *Fluxyear Boxes* (1962), *Fluxus 1/Fluxkit* (1964). The *Fluxyear Boxes*: as Fluxus manifesto, we can find inside scores, texts, games from different Fluxus artists, etc. They could be anything with a high content of humor and at a cheap price, demanding the reader to interact with the piece.

PHOTO 13

ZAJ

Zaj, a Spanish avant-garde movement which based its artistic practice in happenings, performances, music, theater, publications and mail art.

It was clearly influenced by John Cage's ideology, Fluxus events requirements and neodada aesthetic from the 60's.

The main components were: JUAN CASTILLEJO, JUAN HIDALGO and TOMÁS MARCO.

Being invited by José Luis Castillejo and his wife, Juan Hidalgo went to visit them in Algery. As he arrived, he gave the couple two notebooks to draw and fill. This two notebooks plus the one he did conform this piece. In this book are all manner of avant-garde graphic resources like white spaces, interrupted tipographies, random, silence,... influences from Mallarmé, Marinetti, Tristan Tzara, Cage and Debord.

Similarly to Fluxus events, zaj used to do what they called 'Etcéteras', non-traditional concerts: pieces of quotidianness given to the audience, according to the leit motive 'live is art and art is live'.

PHOTO 14
INTERACTIVE

POP-ART: ED RUSCHA

Anne Moegline-Delacroix in her book *Esthétique du livre d'artiste* —Ed. Jean-Michel Place/ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, 1997— pointed out that the 60's Artists' Books have a double origin: an American one with Ed Ruscha's work and an European one with Dieter Roth's. So, although there are many other artists of that period that worked on this art form (like: David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Daniel Spoerri and Lucio Fontana) I will give special attention to these two artists because most of their work was concentrated on Books' Art production.

The celebrated books of Eduard Ruscha is a mixture of Minimalist aesthetic (because of the serial structures) with Pop-Art proposals (quotidian matters) and Conceptual Art foundation (cold and skeptical language).

⇒ *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*
Various Small Fires and Milk (1964)
Nine Swimming pools and a Broken Glass (1968)
⇒ *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966)
Some Los Angeles Apartments (1965)
A Few Pal Trees (1971)
Coloured People (1972)
Hard Light (1978)

PHOTO 15

DIETER ROTH

On the other hand, the European way represented by Dieter Roth is much more influenced by neodadaists' artistic movements from this same decade like Fluxus.

As I've just mentioned Dieter Roth made books as his main creative activity, not as a publication or as a support of other of his artistic practices.

He explores to the maximum the conceptual and structural possibilities and characteristics of the book. And because of that his work can not be in another art form but books. He combines codex structure, experimental graphic design and Concrete Poetry.

Like: *Spirale* (from 1953 to 1964, 9 issues)

Children's Book (from 1954 to 1957)

The collection Snow

PHOTO 16

THE 70's BOOKS' ART

- **Conceptual Art: Marcel Broodthaers**
- **Italian Transvanguard**
- **Linguistic Conceptual Art: Art&Language**

The materialization of the social-political activist climate of the 70's was in the form of cheap and non-reuseable editions in order to promote 'the dematerialization of the art object' started in the 60's

The firm intention to democratize the art work, to scape from the conventional art circuits, to evade the art trade and the success of the performance as an ephemeral 'artifact' make books, and all kind of publications, the best way to subvert the market, although finally it inevitably absorbed it.

Nevertheless, the process of this 'dematerialization of the art object' culminated in the Conceptual Art movement in which substance is based on the importance of the idea by itself. The fact that the most important element of the art was the idea implied that many artists chose hybrid or 'intermedia' forms (using Dick Higgins terms in his article "Intermedia" in *FoewεOmbwhnw*, New York, 1969) and books came to be the 'intermedia format' par excellence.

PHOTO 17
INTERACTIVE

CONCEPTUAL ART: MARCEL BROODTHAERS

Because of the interest that suggests his work I will emphasize Marcel Broodthaer's Books' Art of the Conceptual Art movement, although other important artists could be analyzed too for instance:

Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager, Ellsworth Kelly, Hamish Fulton, Richard Long, Richard Hamilton and Mario Merz.

His work plays with associations between words and things.

La Conquête de l'espace (1975)

Voyage on the North Sea (1973)

Mademoise (1986)

⇒ One of the most important is: *Un coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (1969)

3 different versions: one in aluminium plates, one in translucent paper and the last one in opaque paper.

Broodthaers reproduce the length and width of the original verses of Mallarmé's symbolist poem '*Un coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard*', as strips, preserving its proportions but removing the typography. Broodthaers reduces the poem to structure and, with this, to pure idea and concept.

PHOTO 18

ITALIAN TRANSVANGUARD

The philosophy of this movement was set up on the idea of providing value to little events treated with high irony.

Artists like: Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, De Maria, Sandro Chia.

Francesco Clemente's books include: *Early Morning Exercise*, *Ex Libris*, *Hanuman Books*.

And the eminent *La Partenza de l'Argonauta*.

It is an example of the great complicity that artist and author/poet can achieve. Images and text fight to get the maximum importance in each page. The 49 lithographies that shape the book are mixed and interfere in the text, while others remain at the edge of the page limits. And the subject is related to the Indian culture and its traditions.

PHOTO 19

LINGUISTIC CONCEPTUAL ART: ART&LANGUAGE

Linguistic connotations have always been linked to Conceptual Art.

In this sense, the British group Art&Language have a preeminent position.

The activity of the group was above all articles, papers and essays about Conceptual Art. Since 1969 the group published 20 issues of *Art&Language* as a forum of opinions and debate around this topic/artist practice. The aim was not to exhibit the language 'as art' but as a frame for projects and proposals.

Another publication of the group was *Indexing*, more about installation works.

PHOTO 20

THE 80's BOOKS' ART

- **Minimal Art: Sol Lewitt**
- **German Expressionism: Anselm Kiefer**

As a reaction of the previous decades, the 80's Books' Art leave the social and political positioning in favour of the aesthetic component.

PHOTO 21

INTERACTIVE

MINIMAL ART: SOL LEWITT

The main aim of this movement is to praise the 'cold' characteristic of art, the impersonal and mechanic qualities until the artist trace is erased. Artists like Sol Lewitt condemn the superficiality and expressivity in art.

The minimal artist Sol Lewitt focused on the form and structure of the book playing with reticular and modular elements.

In his books graphic signs turn into horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines combined with squares. Like

Color Grids (1977)

Sides and Corners Torn off (1974)

⇒ *Brick Wall* (1977)

PHOTO 22

GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM: ANSELM KIEFER

Using a strong aggressive and brutal language in the cruelty of the subjects and the way they are treated. And of course linked with the Expressionist movement of the beginning of the 20th Century.

Among all the artists of this movement I'd like to highlight Anselm Kiefer Books' Art production. The subjects of his books are always related to German traditions, reinterpreting his cultural origin, German mythology, alchemy and the recent history of his country.

As he does in *Besetzungen* —'occupations'. It is about the political and cultural horror of the Third Reich, showing a ridiculous documentation of the military conquest as if it was a tourist documentary.

Kiefer usually mixes various codes: organic materials, photographs, painting and writing and they progressively change and diminish. Besides they vary in size and are voluminous.

PHOTO 23

THE 90's BOOKS' ART

■ **New Tendencies in Spain:**

Antoni Muntadas

Zush

Fundación Juan Tabique

Certainly instigated for the use of electronic technologies.

It is in this decade when the Electronic Book appears (Digital Books: Phone based works, e-Books, Audio Books, Screen Based, Projected,...) based in the use of sophisticated digital medias, cybernetic spaces, CD-Rom of virtual reality, net art, interactivity, hypertext, etc.

Of course computer art has its origins in the 50's but the use of electronic art in the field of Books' Art is much more important in the 90's.

The influence of the computer has changed the sphere and concept of text, and thanks to the interactivity it is not something fixed anymore, but is something fluid.

Significant artists of the end of the 20th century are: Masaki Fujihata, Colette Gaiter, Chris Marker,...

But I will point out some works of Spanish artists like Antoni Muntadas

PHOTO 24

ANTONI MUNTADAS

One example of Antoni Muntada's production Screen based Electronic Books is *File Room* (1994). The electronic media allows him to include piles of information. Like in other of Muntadas's pieces, in this one the subject of the work deals with the distortion of the information in the mass media. *File Room* is about censorship. Electronic files connected to the internet in which the spectator/actor states that the cultural and social censorship reigns from the times of Classic Greece. And the audience can contribute to this file, adding other prohibited archives. *File Room* is a symbiosis of Installation Book —because of its environmental characteristics—, a Performance Book —because of the participation and interactivity of the audience—, and the Electronic Book —because of its technological and vitrtual particularities—.

PHOTO 25
INTERACTIVE

ZUSH

In 1998 the Catalan artist Zush did his work *PsicomanauaDigital* in an interactive CD-Rom format, which today is already on the Internet – <http://www.evrug.org>–.

⇒ His work keeps the same attitude of his traditional books in terms of sense and rhythm of reading, but in the interactive piece the reader chooses the order of reading. Furthermore the reader can affect it, can play with it, can change its form, jump, move,... the audience then passes from being a passive spectator to an active one and from here to being an artist through exploring their creative possibilities while interacting with the piece.

PsicomanauaDigital shows the inside artist state, the *evrugo* universe that represents the individual territory, mental and physical that we all have. He tries to explain how all human beings are. He thinks that we all have the necessity of having our individual and personal territory to generate our own laws and philosophy. Being disappointed of what the existing states could offer him the artist decided to create ‘*Evrugo Mental State*’. So, ‘*Evrugo Mental State*’ is his territory filled with its characters, alphabet, passport, flag, ambassadors, ministers, currency, national hymn, etc.

PHOTO 26
INTERACTIVE

FUNDACIÓN JUAN TABIQUE

Group of artists from Barcelona.

They produced a collection of publications called *Fijate*. All the books were very small in size so they could be handled easily. After that they introduced a modification in the publication when it was included in a magazine called *El Europeo* (1994) and it was a kind of DIY (Do It Yourself). So, the book has to be done by each individual owner of the magazine. They put in a chip card so that they could know until where their project had arrived and then they became friends to Juan Tabique Foundation. As a result of the great response that people had they decided

⇒ to expand it by posting it on the internet and so *Fijate The Next Generation* (TNG) was created and the viewer could print it and prepare the new *Fijate* issue by downloading the web page –<http://www.iaa.upf.es/~tabique/>–.

In summary, the concept, aesthetic and formal essence of the 21st Century Books’ Art derives from that of the 2nd half of the 20th Century Books’ Art.