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Creative Practice

When I started making books they were assembled without the aid of a computer, largely traditional means of production according to your classifications. While the last eight books I've produced have had handmade elements, the printing was either photocopied, digital or bubblejet printed.

ABTREE

I think that my work fits across several categories in the artists' books from handmade to sculptural. There appears to be no section for collage - surprising considering the recent surge of interest. I picture the artists' book world as a kind of evolutionary model showing areas of convergence and divergence, but when I think of this I am struck by how genetics turned the entire area of taxonomy upside down based as it was on a visual similarity system which looks remarkably like your ABTREE. So how does one determine a genetic fingerprint for an artists' book?

For instance, I see no distinction between sculpture and an ordinary book which is clearly 3D. So how else could you distinguish them? Possibly using the motivations of the work? I'm not certain about the idea of 'intentions' and whether categorising a book according to what any one person or group of persons said, be they the artist or critic, is valid.

This seems like another backward step. However I was really interested in what Jackie Batey said about almost an ecological type of categorisation for libraries and collections, where books could be cross-referenced by a whole host of characteristics [1]. But how do we include the experience of the work or the relationship between image and text?

Progress is a result of individuals seeking, finding and extending steadily more space in which to move, in which to start, develop and expand. The further the better, the further we break free and drift away, the further the work journeys, the more generative and creative the processes that occur. It has to do with innovativeness and spontaneity and how our art changes or shifts is a natural consequence of our growth. Making art is a becoming, we are making ourselves, changing, and transforming.



I rigged the game from the start, 2008

This brings me back to the question, how to describe the field of artists' books? The term "artists' publications" refers to books records, multiples and music, and surely this is a good thing and a better category/term? Why do we need to keep artists' books as a singular subject? If the book aspect loses its' identity altogether and becomes anything it seems to me it will only be going further in some sort of evolutionary or developmental sense.

What is dividing artists' books from the mainstream of contemporary arts practice - indeed is there anything? I'm not sure this question has been answered yet; everyone sort of assumes there are borders. I haven't seen any. Some say they are only available in specialist galleries and bookshops and are having internal conversations between artists, publishers, curators and collectors rather than external dialogues with a wider public. If this is true (it could be just what people think is happening) we should be asking ourselves: Why do we make books? Is it to communicate and is this any different from any other artists' endeavour?

Technology and Tradition

I think the computer has been a real boon in terms of reproducing imagery. In terms of book design different programmes have different strengths and weaknesses (hence my interest in file interchange formats - it seems to me that with the programmes I'm using either Jpeg or PDF to transfer from one to another and as far as I can remember this has always been the case. So it's unlikely that file interchange formats will become obsolete).

Technologies do influence my creative process, but only in an ecological way. In this new century we are

participating in the production of culture, making it so to speak when we do everything from collecting kitsch plastic toys to making books. I am interested to see how this extends across the web, every time I get on there I discover some strange little universe known only to a select few. As a visual artist I'm particularly interested to see how this is going to shape up with the profusion of readily available digital imaging like mobile phones coupled with the internet's incredible connectivity. As Terry Pratchett said "we live in interesting times", and really anything is possible for anyone and I'm happily looking forward to the next paradigm change. When we're taking all this stuff in at speed who's to say what's influencing whom and where?



A stickman goes for a walk, 2008

There is something I'd like to mention, not really sure where it fits in but I'm certain everyone reading this has their own ideas about what constitutes book production so this will be of interest at the very least for its novelty value. I got this from the promo material for the Byron Bay Writer's festival, which is an annual event organised by the Northern Rivers Writers Centre:

The book is *Modern Odysseus*, the award winning filmmaker Julian Shaw. More than a graphic novel, it is a film in a book and the lead role is "played" in the book by brilliant Australian actor, Colin Friels. The Festival takes a keen interest in screen writing, but Julian straddles page and screen. His collaboration with Colin has produced a ground-breaking book that will challenge audiences.

Reading this got me thinking. If producing a book of this type is the same as producing a film; paid actors, camera people, rolls of film footage - which presumably they go through looking for still shots for the book- then locations, sets, props, plus all the edit, effects and what have you crew, how can this be economically viable if they aren't producing a film?

Surely the book is a by-product? Alternatively how can they finance the printing costs for full colour gloss and expect to sell it at a profit unless they're looking at a collectors, or film merchandise market? And most importantly, at least from our perspective does this constitute an artists' book? Yes, I'm afraid it does.

Marketing and Distribution

I worked out where I sell the majority of my artists' books recently, it's interstate, mainly Brisbane and Queensland or locally here on the North Coast of NSW, Australia. I mainly sell them myself or through regular exhibitions, fairs, my catalogue, and occasionally agents.

I largely sell to private collectors, have sold to some institutional collections and of course gallery directors are important too.

The Future of the Book

How do you think bookshops/galleries/specialist shops will adapt to distribute books produced using just digital media?

I think bookshops/galleries will have to adapt to distributing books produced using just digital media, that's their business. I suppose through their websites or download kiosks like they have in photo developers now. I'm just sort of assuming they've started adapting already? If not what's keeping them?

I suppose most collections and libraries have digital archives and I can't see how the collecting of digital artists' books is any different? Especially film, TV and music archives – they've been dealing with the preservation of things stored in obsolete technologies for decades, how is this any different?

Do you think there is any limit to the definition of an artist's book?

Hell no.

Note:

1. Reply to *Defining the book* on the project's online forum by Jackie Batey (November 10, 2008, 3:51am) "I see where you're coming from on this. Maybe

the debate stems from whether we let the 'maker' categorise their work or the cataloguer categorise it.

I hope that this is where digital systems may really help, an archived artist's book could be listed by key words, phrases, images and meta tags - this would mean that the categories are flexible, depending on the searcher's requirements, i.e. they could search for artefacts by medium, intention, place of creation, tone, page size, scale, theme, artist etc.

Flexible changing boundaries could really enhance our understanding by bringing together artefacts that were unexpected."

All discussions in the forum can be read online at:
<http://artistbooks.ning.com/group/21stcenturybook/forum>

This case study forms part of the Centre for Fine Print Research's AHRC funded project 2008 - 2010: *What will be the canon for the artist's book in the 21st Century (In an arena that now includes both digital and traditionally produced artists' books, what will constitute the concepts of artists' publishing in the future?)* <http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/canon.htm>